Wanting to be somebody:
Post-16 students' and teachers' constructions of full-time GNVQ in a college of further education

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of Warwick, Institute of Education

September, 2002

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List of abbreviations

ABC	*A Basis for Choice*, published by FEU in 1979
ALI	Adult Learning Inspectorate
A-level	Advanced level of the General Certificate of Education examination
AS level	Advanced Supplementary level of the General Certificate of Education examination. Renamed Advanced Subsidiary level after the 1996 Dearing Report
AVCE	Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education
BEC	Business Examination Council (merged with TEC to form BTEC)
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CFE	Certificate of Further Education (precursor to CPVE)
CGLI	City and Guilds of London Institute
C&G	City and Guilds of London Institute
CPVE	Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education
CSE	Certificate of Secondary Education
DES	Department of Education and Science (from 1990 renamed DfE)
DfE	Department for Education (merged with ED to form DfEE in 1995)
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment (1995-2001)
DfES	Department for Education and Skills (replaced DfEE in 2001)
DTI	Department of Trade and Industry
Edexel	Edexel Foundation (formed in 1996 by the merger of BTEC and The University of London Examinations and Assessment Council)
ED	Employment Department (merged into DfEE in 1995)

FE	Further Education
FEDA	Further Education Development Agency (now LSDA)
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
FEU	Further Education Unit (later FEDA, now LSDA)
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualification
HE	Higher Education
HMI	Her Majesty's Inspectorate
HND	Higher National Diploma awarded by BTEC
HRM	Human Resource Management
IPPR	Institute for Public Policy Research
LEA	Local Education Authority
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
LSDA	Learning and Skills Development Agency
NCVQ	National Council for Vocational Qualifications
NNEB	Nursery Nursing Examining Board (now Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education (CACHE)
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
OCR	Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations Board
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education
PCET	Post-Compulsory Education and Training
ROSLA	Raising of the School Leaving Age
RSA	Royal Society of Arts Examinations Board
SCAA	School Curriculum and Assessment Authority
TEC	Technician Examination Council, merged with BEC to form BTEC
TEC	Training and Enterprise Council (became LSCs in 2001)
TTA	Teacher Training Agency
TUC	Trades Union Congress

TVEI	Technical and Vocational Education Initiative
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service for the UK
YT	Youth Training
YTS	Youth Training Scheme

Acknowledgements

This thesis focuses on one college of further education and I would like to thank all the lecturing staff and students who contributed to the study.

I am also grateful to the many friends, colleagues and students with whom I have discussed work on this thesis during the past few years, and who have helped me to clarify my thinking. In particular, I am indebted to my supervisor, Denis Gleeson for all the ideas and guidance he has provided. Kathryn Ecclestone and Nest Thomas have given many hours of their time talking through ideas and commenting on earlier drafts of my work. Jerry Wellington, James Avis, Cheryl Hunt, Ros Ollin, Julia Davies, Pam Cole, Linda MacLeod, Jaswinder Dhillon and Melanie Walker have read and discussed work in progress, and provided helpful and constructive feedback along the way.

Both the University of Sheffield where I now work, and the University of Wolverhampton, where I worked previously, have supported my doctoral studies, and I am grateful to them. My thanks also go to Jamila Bibi and Beena Samrai, who transcribed the interview tapes.

The ideas in this thesis have accompanied me up many mountains and over thousands of cycling miles. I would like to thank members of the Solihull Cycling Club, some of whom know more about youth transitions than they had ever anticipated. Finally, I would like to thank my partner, who has shared the mountains and the ideas and who has been immensely patient and encouraging, especially when the going got tough, on what sometimes seemed like a lifelong journey.

Abstract

Since the beginning of the 1990s, UK policy on post-school transitions has emphasised the need for young people to continue with education and training after 16, and to develop high levels of skill to meet labour market needs. GNVQs were introduced as part of widespread changes to post-16 education and training in England and Wales in the early 1990s, and formed a middle vocationally-related pathway in the national qualifications framework.

This thesis explores how policy for initial post-16 education and training has changed repeatedly since the 1970s, leading to numerous different arrangements and to new forms of transition for young people. It evaluates critically how GNVQs fit into this picture, and relates their role to wider debates around the purpose of initial post-16 education and training.

Using a case study, which focuses on the experience of lecturers and full-time students in one college of further education in the Midlands in the 1990s, the study finds that the social conditions of learning were very significant for students' and lecturers' perceptions of GNVQ. Despite the emphasis on qualifications-led reform, and the highly-specified nature of GNVQ, which attempted to impose new approaches to learning, students and teachers made sense of their experience and constructed their own meanings for GNVQ, by reconciling the specifications with students' orientations to learning and imagined futures. They engaged in 'making the best of it', by collaborating or colluding to make GNVQ work for them.

However, the actions of students and lecturers in making the best of the constraints of GNVQs needs to be set within the context of wider structures and patterns of opportunity, where GNVQs form part of a system which continues to be dominated by A-levels and the academic route. This results in unequal opportunities within diverse qualifications pathways. The study concludes that any proposals for change to initial post-16 education and training need to combine understandings of the structural context in which young people's transitions are taking place, with more detailed insight into the experience of teachers and students, who make and shape the meaning of different routes and qualifications in practice.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The changing context for transition: growing up in the 'learning society'

Introduction

This thesis investigates the changing nature of post-16 transitions in the 1990s. It focuses on General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs), which were created in 1992 and formed a distinct middle, broad vocational pathway within a three track national qualifications system in England for almost a decade, until 2000. GNVQs represent an important element of current government policy aimed at increasing the participation and achievement of young people in initial post-16 education and training. Policy reforms of the past decade have been couched in a language of 'equal status' for academic and vocational education (DES, ED, WO, 1991, p.24), 'entitlement' to high quality learning opportunities (DfEE, 1996a, p.2), 'empowerment' of young people and their parents (ibid, p.49) and 'choice' (ibid, p.9). This study explores how such claims have been implemented in learning in GNVQs, and how young people and their teachers perceive the opportunities which GNVQs are claimed to offer. By focusing on these perspectives,

the study aims to consider how current education and training policy is experienced in practice, and what implications this has for young people growing up at the beginning of the 21st century.

My interest in the broad, vocational route, and in GNVQs, reflects a concern for equalising chances, which has run throughout my educational career. In the 1980s I was a teacher in a city in the north of England. Amongst a plethora of initiatives and changes, I was involved with TVEI, the introduction of GCSEs, and the launch of the National Curriculum. I also lived through the shift in economic climate from recession to apparent skills shortage as a result of what was called the demographic time bomb, which anticipated a shortage of young people to fill jobs at the end of the 1980s.

My experience demonstrated very clearly that there were no easy answers to achieving fair, equitable and worthwhile education for all. It was also evident that young people did not simply accept their lot, but were aware of and responsive to the conditions surrounding them. They had their own gradations of what counted as worthwhile. As modular courses took hold, I overheard young people ask each other "Are you a single subject, or are you a modular?" This question pinpointed succinctly the status of 'pick and mix' modular courses. Yet students were also pleased and motivated when a module was successfully

completed, and the grade was one that they were proud of.

They were also aware of changes to the economic climate. The move out of recession at the end of the 1980s created a climate of greater hope and higher motivation; the tangible possibility of a future job made education worth the effort. This study follows through that thread of complex hope and desire to create a secure future, in a world of increasing risk and uncertainty.

The changing context for transition: growing up in the 'learning society'

The environment in which young people are making the transition from youth to adulthood at the turn of the 21st century in Britain has undergone major transformations. The hallmarks of the late 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century are rapid economic, technological and social change, which have had a major impact on all aspects of life. Technological innovation and cheaper transportation costs mean that companies can move production to where costs are cheapest, leading to competition between labour markets across the world (Clarke and Newman, 1997). It is widely believed that Western capitalist economies need to concentrate on high-value products produced in lower volume in order to remain competitive, and leave low cost and low skilled mass

production of standardized products, referred to as Fordism (Brown and Lauder, 1992; Murray, 1990), to be carried out elsewhere. Furthermore, there is the emergence of what is described as the knowledge economy, based on the production, distribution and use of knowledge and information (Clarke, 2001). In the knowledge economy, it is believed that increasing numbers of workers need to utilize and be able to respond to changing forms of knowledge (Jarvis, 2000).

In Britain, there have been significant changes to the industrial base, with a major decline in manufacturing industry, seen as an indication that industrial society has given way to a post-industrial society (Brown et al, 1997, p.1). At its post-war height in 1955, there were more workers employed in manufacturing than in all of the private and public sector services combined. Since then, there has been a shift from production to consumption, with the rapid growth of the service sector, so that by 1983 there were almost two service workers for each industrial worker (Rowthorn, 1990). Since the international oil crisis of the 1970s, there have been repeated claims by successive governments that Britain must focus on service rather than manufacture and on high technology, high value-added products in order to maintain competitiveness (Keep and Mayhew, 1988; 1999). However, despite such policy rhetoric, Keep and Mayhew's (1999) analysis of the labour market in the UK leads them to conclude that high skills and low skills industry coexist, and that it may

be sufficiently profitable for some companies to remain in low-skills industry rather than to invest in high skills.

The experience of young people in the 1970s and 1980s was defined not by enhanced life chances, and greater opportunities to gain high-skilled employment, but by the collapse of the youth labour market. The various youth training schemes and courses introduced during this period have been strongly criticised as a series of piecemeal initiatives (Raggatt and Unwin, 1991), which amounted to a means of 'warehousing' young people (Coles, 1988b, p.13) until employment became available, rather than offering high quality education and training. A turning point was reached at the end of the 1980s, with widespread agreement about the need for reform to the system as a whole (Whiteside, 1992). Whiteside refers to the formation of a new alliance which included members of the Labour Party, modernisers and industrial trainers in the Conservative Party, the Department of Employment, the Department of Trade and Industry, the National Council for Vocational Qualifications, the Confederation of British Industry, the Trades Union Congress and supporters in different sectors of education.

Agreement centred around the notion of the low skills equilibrium as the major problem facing the British economy. This was based on an analysis of the failure of the education and training schemes of the 1980s put

forward in an influential paper by Finegold and Soskice (1988). Finegold and Soskice argued that the development of a large, mass production manufacturing sector as a result of the industrial revolution, which employed mainly unskilled workers, and required only a small number of skilled workers and university graduates, had effectively stifled demand for improvements in skill levels. The two main routes into employment had traditionally been at the end of compulsory schooling or at the end of a course in higher education, and as a result there was little incentive for most young people to continue with further education or training, resulting in what they referred to as a low skills equilibrium. Using international comparisons, Finegold and Soskice showed that the British education system performed badly on two counts; firstly, young people finished compulsory schooling with poorer levels of performance than elsewhere, and secondly, a high percentage of young people left school at sixteen, meaning that they entered work with relatively low levels of qualifications. Comparative studies suggested that young people elsewhere experienced a longer period of general education. Furthermore, Finegold and Soskice found that once in work, British firms offered a lower quality and quantity of training than their European counterparts. Thus low participation in post-compulsory education and training was compounded by a lack of commitment by British industry to invest in the learning and development of the workforce. Finegold and

Soskice concluded that the failure to increase participation in post-compulsory education and training in the 1980s, despite the recession, was based on three main factors: too few of Britain's companies produced high value-added products, the demand for well-educated and trained employees was weak, and investment in training by UK employers was too low - including offering learning opportunities to young people who had left full-time education (Finegold and Soskice, 1988, pp.27-28). They argued that Britain could not pursue a high skills strategy until it broke out of the low-skills equilibrium, and there was therefore a need to increase the supply of skills by raising participation and attainment in initial post-compulsory education. They argued that part of the solution was to extend broad, general education to all up to the age of 18, as part of an overall culture of lifetime education and training.

At the beginning of the 1990s, their analysis found a broad spectrum of support. Within Whiteside's (1992) broad alliance there was a consensus over the need for a coherent qualification system offering progression into employment or advanced education, with clear pathways and opportunities to move between pathways, and with A-levels no longer dominating as the 'gold standard'. However, as Whiteside observes, there was less agreement about how to achieve this, and how radical the steps would have to be, and little pressure on employers to make a substantial contribution to the provision of training.

Nevertheless, the impact of such a widespread consensus on young people has been considerable. They face an expectation that they should continue with education or training at the end of compulsory schooling, dominated by what Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000, p.7) describe as a ''rhetoric and reification' of a continuing demand for an upskilled, technologically literate and flexible work force which will contribute towards national economic competitiveness' which 'is embedded in policy condensates like 'life-long learning' and the 'learning society'.'

Education policy and lifelong learning

To describe young people as growing up in the 'learning society' is not to suggest that the UK can be defined as a learning society. Both the learning society and lifelong learning, which tend to be used interchangeably in the literature, are contested concepts (Young, 1998), and there is no agreed definition of what a learning society is. There is, nevertheless, widespread agreement that the concept of lifelong learning has been used as a focus, or rallying cry, for policy on education and training throughout the 1990s (Edwards et al, 1998). Field and Leicester (2000) suggest that:

> lifelong learning is now the common policy framework for debating and defining the post-school education and training system. (Field and Leicester, 2000, p.xvi)

Furthermore, education and training are now central instruments of

economic and social policymaking (Hodgson and Spours, 1999). Field and Leicester (2000, p.xvi) suggest that: 'Among policy makers, the consensus appears to be that lifelong learning is both necessary and desirable.' In this policy context, lifelong learning is almost always used approvingly, and has therefore a normative dimension. It is seen as the solution to current economic, political and social problems (Hughes and Tight, 1995), leading Coffield (1999) to refer to lifelong learning as a 'wonder drug' (p.479). Under the Conservative Government, the 'wonder drug' of lifelong learning was applied predominantly to economic problems. Lifelong learning was seen as the means of increasing the workforce skills, or human capital, required by business and industry. This emphasis is particularly evident in the Competitiveness White Papers produced by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI, 1994; DTI, 1995; DTI, 1996). According to the 1994 White Paper 'In future, the most successful nations will be those which develop high quality, skilled and motivated workforces and make good use of them.' (DTI, 1994, p.18) The second White Paper (DTI, 1995) proclaimed that:

> To compete internationally the UK needs a highly motivated and well qualified workforce. We need young people who are well prepared for work, employers who see the importance of developing the skills of their employees, and people in the labour force who take their development seriously. (DTI, 1995, p. 78)

For the Conservative Government of the time, this was by now common sense: 'Throughout the UK there is a common understanding of the contribution which effective education and training can and must make to competitiveness.' (DTI, 1995, p.97) The third White Paper (DTI, 1996) suggested that British competitiveness should now focus on 'the global knowledge-based economy of the 21st century.' (DTI, 1996, p.7) and linked the role and purpose of education and training for young people closely to this goal:

> the UK will only succeed if the nation's young people have the right skills. (DTI, 1996, p.7)
>
> The need to foster and improve skills, vital contributors to our economic growth and productivity, has long been recognised. [...] The quality and relevance of education and training are therefore ever more central to competitive performance. (DTI, 1996, p.34)

For New Labour, economic concerns have remained of prime importance. In the government Green Paper on lifelong learning, *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998) David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, emphasises that learning is the key to economic prosperity, and that investment in human capital will lead to success in 'the knowledge-based global economy' (ibid, p.7). Similar arguments appear in the 1999 White Paper on post-16 qualifications, *Learning to Succeed: a New Framework for Post-16 Learning* (DfEE, 1999a), which states that:

> The challenge we face to equip individuals, employers and the country to meet the demands of the 21st century is immense

and immediate. In the information and knowledge-based economy, investment in human capital - in the intellect and creativity of people - is replacing past patterns of investment in plant, machinery and physical labour. To continue to compete, we must equip ourselves for this new world with new and better skills. We must improve levels of knowledge and understanding and develop the adaptability to respond to change. (DfEE, 1999a, p.12)

At the same time, New Labour sees lifelong learning as a strategic response to issues of equity and social cohesion (Field and Leicester, 2000; Hodgson and Spours, 1999), though here too, the response is often in terms of employment. Thus, in the Social Exclusion Unit's 1999 report *Bridging the Gap* (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999), the Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, in his Foreword to the document, focuses on the importance of training for employment as the way to achieve social inclusion:

> as we move into an economy based more on knowledge, there will be ever fewer unskilled jobs. For this generation, and for young people in the future, staying at school or in training until 18 is no longer a luxury. It is becoming a necessity. (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, p.6)

Reconstructing post-school transitions in the context of lifelong learning

The policy context of lifelong learning has had a profound effect on young people's transitions. The term transition, as it applies here, has traditionally been used to indicate the point in young people's lives when they make the transition from school to work, and has been seen as an important period of socialisation into adult life. But it is no longer

straightforward to talk about post-school or post-16 transitions in this way (Kelly and Kenway, 2001), for the transition from school to work is now more prolonged for all young people, and there is no longer any guarantee of a transition into work at the end of it. Reflecting these changes, new terms and demarcations have appeared. Throughout the 1990s, researchers have used 14-19 rather than 16-19 as the way of classifying education and training for young people (see for example Halsall and Cockett, 1996; Tomlinson, H., 1993; Tomlinson, S., 1997), and both the 1996 White Paper (DfEE, 1996) and the most recent Green Paper on education for young people (DfES, 2002a) refer to 14-19 education.

The shifting boundaries of transition may be seen as a strong push to extend compulsory education through to the age of 19, which is reflected in terms such as 'extended initial education' which Gorard (2000, p.1) uses to refer to 'initial schooling and consecutive near-continuous episodes of post-compulsory education or training.' Alternatively, the age of 14 may be defined as the point of demarcation for a new phase of education and training, similar to the 'formation' stage in some other European systems (RSA, 1991). The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) in 1989 defined the 14-18 phase as a foundation stage, when education or training should remain compulsory for all young people (CBI, 1989), but which remained distinct from schooling up to the age of 14. In their book on recent education policy-making, Hodgson and

Spours (1999, p.22) use 14 as their starting point 'on the grounds that the curriculum and qualifications at 14+ are increasingly seen as the starting point of a transition to adult and working life.'

In both cases, education and training are perceived by policy-makers and a range of educationalists as an essential part of young people's experience for a more prolonged period of time than in the past, with 19 representing a new boundary point. However, in the context of this study, the end of compulsory schooling at 16 continues to be an important transition point for young people, not from school to work, but from school to post-compulsory education in a college environment. It is a significant psychological boundary, when school can be left behind and new choices made about the future.

For all young people, the transition phase at 16-19 now takes place largely in education and training settings. 71% of young people currently continue with post-compulsory education, and 86% are involved in some form of education or training (DfES, 2002c). In this study I refer to the 16-19 phase as initial Post-Compulsory Education and Training (initial PCET). It is distinct from 'preparatory' education in schools and also separate from forms of education and training for adults.

Throughout the 1990s, there have been two key goals in government policy for this initial post-compulsory phase: to increase participation and

raise achievement. The White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES, ED, WO, 1991), where GNVQs were proposed, identified these goals at the start of the 1990s, listing the following aims for initial post-compulsory education and training:

> - to make high quality FE or training the norm for all 16/17 year olds
> - to increase all-round levels of attainment by young people
> - to increase the proportion of young people acquiring higher levels of skill and expertise. (DES, DE, WO, 1991, p.2)

The White Paper's aims are tied closely to economic imperatives.

Increasing young people's credentials, it is claimed, will increase their employability and help achieve national prosperity:

> For young people, [our plans] offer the means of qualifying for careers with good prospects and job satisfaction. They will create better opportunities for young people from all backgrounds, of both sexes, from inner cities and elsewhere. For employers, they offer the means of working with education and training providers to produce skilled and motivated young people who will make a real contribution to the success of their companies and local communities. For the 21st century economy, they offer the prospect of a workforce with first class skills to produce the wealth on which our society depends for its standard of living. (DES, ED, WO, 1991, p.64)

At the same time, Avis (1993) points out that the beginning of the 1990s was seen by educationalists seeking progressive reforms as an opportunity to combine economic goals with goals of social justice and

critical citizenship.

The development of the broad, vocational route based on GNVQs has been an important focal point for the realisation of these goals. For both the Conservative and Labour governments, and for many professionals working in schools and further education, GNVQs have represented a key policy response to increasing participation and raising achievement to achieve economic competitiveness; for educationalists seeking progressive reforms, GNVQs have been a focus for interest, because broad and general full-time education for all is seen as a means of achieving goals of social justice and democratic citizenship (see Chapter Two).

The research questions

Set against the above context, this study aims to address the following questions:

1 What is the role of GNVQs in recent education and training policy for young people?

2 How is learning constructed in GNVQs, both officially and in practice?

3 How do teachers and students create a meaning and purpose for GNVQ?

4 What specific contribution does GNVQ make to constructing young people's transitions from compulsory schooling to adult life?

The aim is to explore the meanings that are made of GNVQs at a micro level, by teachers and students who experience the qualification in practice. The study therefore considers how policy intentions translate into practice, and expectations of practice. When I planned the study, I aimed to develop a better understanding of young people's relationship with knowledge and the curriculum. This linked to my interest in proposals for a broad, general post-16 curriculum based on principles of social justice and critical democracy. Specifically, the work of Avis et al (1996a) concerning the nature of a curriculum for active citizenship, Bloomer's (1997) ideas about curriculum-making, Hodkinson's (1994) views about a critical and participatory curriculum, and Young's (1998) discussion of the curriculum of the future, were influential in my thinking. I felt a certain unease, nevertheless; knowledge and the curriculum, and curriculum-making in the sense of choosing and constructing curriculum knowledge, did not resonate for me with how 'ordinary kids' (Brown, 1988), the sort of young people who were following GNVQ courses in the case study college, understood or discussed their studies. My unease was put into words in a paper by Arnot and colleagues (2001). Drawing on the work of Ruddock and Flutter (2000), they observe that:

> In our experience pupils do not have much to say about the curriculum as Young (1999, p.463) defines it: 'the way knowledge is selected and organised into subjects and fields for educational purposes'. Rather, they talk about forms of

> teaching and learning that they find challenging or limiting and importantly, about what we have called (Ruddock et al, 1996) the *conditions of learning* in school; how regimes and relationships shape their sense of status as individual learners and as members of the community and, consequently, affect their sense of commitment to learning in school. (Ruddock and Flutter, 2000, p.76, cited in Arnot et al, 2001, p.1)

Ruddock and Flutter emphasise the importance of relationships in formal learning contexts. Where recent work on learning careers (for example, Bloomer, 1997; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997, 1999, 2000; Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000) draws attention to the need to understand the effect of the wider social conditions of learning on young people's transitions to adulthood, Ruddock and Flutter, and Arnot et al, suggest that there remain important insights to be gained into young people's perceptions and constructions of the formal learning experience itself.

This study focuses on the nature of the formal learning experience. I draw on what young people have to say about their previous experience of learning in school, the influence and support of families, and their visions of the future, to develop a better understanding of young people's orientations to learning, but the key focus of the study is the ways in which the environment of Midlands College, and the relationships which students form with lecturers, play a major role in how GNVQ is constructed in practice.

The structure of the thesis

This chapter locates the changing context for transition against a background of major changes to the economy and a policy environment dominated by ideas of lifelong learning and the learning society.

Chapter Two examines debates about qualifications reform in relation to the broad vocational route and GNVQs. These are contextualised by drawing on three different models of learning, which are put forward in literature on lifelong learning. The chapter traces the debates surrounding qualifications and curricula through from what has been called the 'new vocationalism' of the 1980s, to GNVQs in the 1990s.

Chapter Three explores the ways in which post-school transitions and learning in initial PCET have been theorised in a range of literature. The chapter examines how a context of risk and uncertainty have affected young people's transitions, and explores the concept of learning careers, and theories of social and cultural capital on which ideas of learning careers are based. The final part of the chapter outlines a model for exploring young people's transitions in the case study college.

Chapter Four discusses changing cultures of teaching and learning in further education (FE), including the impact of markets and managerialism on professional practices, and the impact of changes to FE

on lecturers and their professional identities. The second part of the chapter explores these ideas in relation to the case study college, focusing on the ways in which GNVQ provision changed teaching and learning cultures in the college.

Chapter Five provides the methodological rationale for the fieldwork, and presents the methods used. The case study draws upon an ethnographic tradition which 'emphasises the need for detailed studies of the effects of policy changes as they are experienced by those involved.' (Walford, Purvis and Pollard, 1988, p.12). As Walford et al suggest, such studies 'can show that there may well be conflicts between the official rhetoric at the macro level and the reality at grassroots.' (ibid, p.13)

Chapters Six and Seven report on the fieldwork data. Chapter Six focuses on the experience and perceptions of teachers, and Chapter Seven on the experience and perceptions of students.

Chapter Eight evaluates the implications arising from the data, bringing together issues raised in the earlier chapters of the thesis with data from the case study college.

The final chapter looks to the future. At the time of writing this thesis, an era has ended. GNVQs are likely to be phased out over the next three years, and are in the process of being replaced by vocational GCSEs and

vocational A-levels. A 14-19 continuum is intended to bring an end to the major transition point at 16. There are proposals for 16-19 education to be taken out of FE colleges and located in 6th form colleges or schools. I believe that a deeper understanding of young people's experience of studying for GNVQs is important to appreciating the threats and opportunities created by current changes, as yet another restructuring hits the system.

The thesis aims to provide an insight into:

- the nature of transition through the broad, vocational route in the 1990s
- how GNVQs are situated in policy-practice debates
- how young people and their teachers construct meanings for their educational experience at a time of upheaval
- how meanings are constructed within an apparently second best route
- the role of GNVQs in the context of a 'learning society'.

Chapter 2

Contested terrain: the struggle over the broad, vocational route in initial PCET

Introduction

In the context of a 'learning' society, where continuing with initial PCET is perceived by both government and some academic researchers as a necessity, the role and purpose of broad, vocational education take on a new significance. Since the late 1970s, linked to a rhetoric of a high skills knowledge society in government policy, vocationalism has been seen as a key means of increasing participation amongst young people who in the past would have left education at the earliest opportunity (Bates et al, 1984).

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the complex and contradictory context which has framed the experience of the young people and lecturers in the case study. Both groups have faced a relentless policy rhetoric of a high skills future, for which extended participation in education and training is seen as essential. However, this has contrasted

with the realities of the risks and uncertainties of a stratified labour market across the UK, where skills needs vary, and levels of income and employment security differ.

The chapter explores how the broad, vocational route has been constructed within initial PCET. It traces the development of the middle pathway in the National Qualifications Framework of the 1990s (QCA, 2000) back to the initiatives associated with the 'new vocationalism' of the 1980s and examines the debates about the function and role of broad, vocational education within an overall system of initial PCET. The chapter suggests that the broad, vocational route (at least as it existed until the introduction of Curriculum 2000) has formed part of a stratified system of education and training for young people, which appears to mirror the stratification of the labour market. As a result, the function and purpose of initial PCET, and the role of broad, vocational education within it, have been contested terrain amongst academics, politicians, and government departments.

Part one of the chapter outlines three models of a learning society. These models are introduced, because they draw attention to underlying themes in discussions about the broad, vocational route, and draw attention to continuities in the issues raised by policy initiatives and research. Part two discusses the precursors to GNVQs, and part three

focuses on GNVQs themselves and the debates which surrounded them in the 1990s.

The role and purpose of learning in a learning society

The growing literature on lifelong learning suggests that learning may serve a variety of purposes, and a number of models have been put forward to explain these varying purposes (see, for example, Coffield, 1999; Ranson, 1998; Young, 1998). Three models are particularly useful in relation to provision for young people in initial post-compulsory education and training: a credentialist model, a social control model and a social democratic model. All these models are discernible in debates about initial PCET, and they help to illuminate the struggle over the nature and purpose of broad, vocational education and varying perceptions of the role and purpose of GNVQs in the 1990s.

A credentialist or skills growth model

There is widespread agreement that the dominant model in education and training policy is a credentialist one (Coffield, 1999; Young, 1998), which emphasises economic imperatives and the economic relevance of learning (Brown et al, 1997; Edwards et al, 1998; Field and Leicester, 2000). The primary concern of this model is to ensure that the vast majority of the population has qualifications which are related to future

employment (Young, 1998).

The model is based on a theory of human capital, which Woodhall (1991) defines as follows:

> The concept of human capital refers to the fact that human beings invest in themselves, by means of education, training, or other activities, which raises their future income by increasing their lifetime earnings. (ibid, p.27)

Thus the skills and knowledge which a person has can be seen as a form of capital, in which they and others can invest and which may thereby generate added value (Stevens, 1999). For employers, investment in human capital provides a means of developing the knowledge, skills, and also the personal characteristics they desire in employees. Coffield (1999) therefore defines this model as a skills growth model.

However, the use of 'credentialist' draws attention to the overriding concern with this approach, which is the achievement of credentials. The term indicates that human capital theory is more concerned with the measurable level of education achieved, rather than the content (Moore and Hickox, 1994). Credentials are defined as a key purpose of education and training, and the level of qualifications achieved is equated with economic competitiveness in the context of a global labour market (Fuller and Unwin, 1999).

Such an emphasis can be seen clearly in the Competitiveness White Papers produced by successive governments in the 1990s (DTI, 1994; 1995; 1996; 1998) as well as the National Training and Education Targets (NTETs) (National Training Task Force, 1992; NACETT, 1995) and the National Learning Targets (NACETT and DfEE, 1998). The need for learning to be demonstrated through the achievement of qualifications has produced a demand for new systems of assessment and accreditation of skills and knowledge, and led to the establishment of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) in 1986, which was responsible for developing GNVQs at the beginning of the 1990s.

An emphasis on individual credentials allows them to become what Brown et al (1997, p.9) refer to as a 'positional good', since they enable individuals to position themselves in the labour market. While qualifications may demonstrate what a person has achieved, they can and often are used by employers to screen potential employees, and to identify those considered most likely to give a high rate of return on the investment in human capital. The pursuit of higher credentials may lead to credential inflation, so that instead of more people entering more highly-skilled jobs, those with ever-higher credentials maintain a competitive edge over others, even though the skills and qualifications they have may bear little actual relation to the work performed (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980).

Significant flaws have been identified with the credentialist model. Although government policy refers to a 'high-skills economy' (DTI, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1998), and more recently an 'information and knowledge based economy' (DfEE, 1999a, p.12), labour market research suggests that high levels of skill are not required throughout the workforce (Keep, 1999; Stevens, 1999). Instead, flexibility of skills creates new forms of workforce segmentation, across which skills levels, provision of training, and job security vary (Phillimore, 1990). A variety of typologies of workforce segmentation are used to demonstrate these differences. Keep and Mayhew (1999) use Robert Reich's (1991) occupational typology, which identifies three groups, classified according to skill requirements: high-level symbolic analysts or knowledge workers; those engaged in routine production, such as car factory workers, and low-level supervisors; and those providing interpersonal services, such as waiters, security guards and shop assistants. Whereas theoretical knowledge is needed by knowledge workers, tacit knowledge, personal characteristics, interpersonal skills, and codes of behaviour are more important in the service sector (Keep and Mayhew, 1999, pp.9-11).

Evans, Behrens and Kaluza (2000), drawing on Doeringer and Piore's (1971) work, refer to a two-fold classification of workers employed in primary and secondary labour markets, which emphasises different conditions of employment. Primary sector jobs are characterized by high

productivity, good working conditions, stable employment patterns, above average wages, and well-established systems of initial and continuing training, with structured promotion ladders. There may be strong union organisation. Firms are often large and capital-intensive, and there is widespread use of information and communication technology. In contrast, secondary sector workers have lower wages, few opportunities for initial and continuing training, with at most a short training period to learn tasks and minimal training to take on new tasks. There is an abundance of workers available, no stability in employment, and low unionization.

Hutton (1996) has described Britain as a 30: 30: 40 society, referring to skills and job security. His analysis of Britain in the 1990s identifies 40 per cent of the potential working population as having secure (though not necessarily well-paid) employment. 30 per cent are in insecure jobs, based on fixed-term contracts, and part-time or casual work, which are poorly protected and carry few benefits. The final 30 per cent are the disadvantaged. They are unemployed or economically inactive.

These classifications imply that there is little evidence for a simple linear connection between levels of education and training and improved economic performance (Ashton and Green, 1996; Keep and Mayhew, 1999). Although education and training would appear to be an important

feature of successful industrial economies, greater participation and achievement may be the result of economic success, rather than the cause of it. Brown et al (1997, p.9) suggest that there is a 'confused picture of upskilling, reskilling, and deskilling'. Keep (1997) finds that companies seek competitive advantage in a number of ways, of which the high-skilled, value-added route is only one. In the UK, he finds evidence of businesses basing their success on keeping costs low and using low-skill methods. As a result, individuals may achieve higher skills, but be unable to find work because there is not the demand for their skills.

The above suggests that flexible specialisiation does not bring similar benefits across the workforce. Furlong and Cartmel (1999), citing Jessop (1987), refer to the difference as a skill-flexible core and a time-flexible periphery. People are encouraged to believe that they can move out of the casualised periphery by achieving higher levels of skills and knowledge (Avis et al, 1996b; Merson, 1995), but, as Payne (1999, p.25) observes:

> the suspicion is that the reality is one of too few highly skilled jobs and new patterns of production and management strategy which increasingly segregate a shrinking 'core' of relatively secure, highly skilled, 'knowledge' workers from a swelling periphery made up of the low waged, low skilled and casualised.

A social control model

In the face of these contradictions, Coffield (1999) proposes that learning might be better seen as a form of social control. He draws on evidence from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Learning Society Programme which he led (see Coffield, 2000a) to argue that rather than opening up opportunities, 'lifelong learning has become a moral obligation and a social constraint' (Coffield, 1999, p.488). In the workplace, he believes that 'Lifelong learning is being used to socialise workers to the escalating demands of employers' (ibid, p.488). The ideal worker of the future is one who internalises the need for employability, willingly pays for their own continuous learning, and offers genuine commitment to each job however short. He draws attention to what Hughes and Tight (1995) call the myth of the learning society, where empowerment hides intensification of workloads via increased delegation, flexibility covers strategies to reduce costs which increase job insecurity, and employability hides the retreat from a policy of full employment to periodic unemployment between jobs.

His view echoes that of other academics. Brown et al (1997) suggest that the expansion of education can be viewed either as a move towards a learning society and increased social justice, whereby a whole range of skills including those gained through informal learning are recognised, or

as increasing surveillance and the disciplining of individuals through the control of all aspects of their life (see also Edwards and Usher, 1994). Strain (1998) suggests that the dominant view of lifelong learning as a part or extension of work, or as a new form of work, makes it compulsory and unavoidable, and Avis (1997, p.244) speaks of 'a model of the knowledge worker and information society in which we are all required to become learners'.

The theme of social control has been prominent in research on the role of vocationalism in initial PCET, and it has been suggested by Bates et al (1984) and more recently Ecclestone (2000), that subtle forms of social control can be hidden behind apparently caring approaches amongst teachers. Bates et al and Ecclestone discuss how teachers and lecturers face the contradiction that what may be intended as caring practice can slip into forms of social control; for example, Ecclestone suggests that differentiating between the needs of learners may in effect lead to limited goals for certain students, which reflect low expectations of their potential (see also Wellington, 1993a).

A social democratic model

A third model of learning offers a vision of what a learning society could entail. This model brings together a range of ideas which draw on social theories of learning. Coffield defines a social theory of learning as one

where 'learning is located in social participation and dialogue as well as in the heads of individuals' (Coffield, 1999, p.493). The focus is shifted from individual cognitive processes, to the social relationships and arrangements which shape learner identities, and which may differ over time and from place to place. This model embraces a number of different ideas.

For several writers, the changing nature of work offers the potential for new ways of thinking about knowledge and knowledge creation. Young (1998) talks of flexible specialisation which involves new relationships between theoretical understanding and its application in the workplace, based on new forms of knowledge relations between subjects and disciplines, and between subject and non-subject knowledge. Engeström (1994; 2001) uses the term expansive learning to refer to how teams of people need to collaborate in the working environment and pool their specialist knowledge, in order to create the understandings and knowledge now required, and to develop what Ashton (1999, p.348) refers to as collective intelligence.

Ashton (1999) and Keep (1997) argue that the organization as collective entity or network, rather than the individual, creates and transmits certain bodies of knowledge and expertise. Skill takes the form of collective intelligence, or core organizational competencies, which are

related to communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This involves a conceptualisation of skill which sees learning as related to the social processes through which learning takes place, rather than dependent on processes undertaken by individuals.

Elsewhere there is increasing interest in social capital in connection with a social model of learning. Social capital is seen as a means of moving away from the individualism of human capital, and promoting communal and social interests. Interest in the concept focuses on the significance of networks and relationships between people, and explores how co-operation and trust in the workplace may be of mutual benefit and may promote learning as a means of tackling the complexity and interrelatedness of what goes on in the workplace as well as the wider world (Aldridge, Halpern and Fitzpatrick, 2002; Ecclestone and Field, 2002; Putnam, 2001; Schuller, 2000, 2001; Woolcock, 2001).

For learning in initial PCET, Young (1998) proposes what he calls a connective model. He draws on Engeström's (1994) work on activity theory and expanded learning, and argues that current forms of knowledge specialisation, and distinctions between qualifications, do not reflect the changing needs of society or the workplace. A connective model of learning combines a number of features: new types of interdisciplinary study which cross academic vocational boundaries; the

development of critical skills, whereby existing practices and views are challenged and explored; the learning and use of new concepts, and opportunities for practical application, where new ideas are tried out in the real world.

Hyland (1999) also provides a definition of what a social theory of learning would look like for young people, suggesting three key features which he considers essential for initial post-compulsory education and training. These comprise: individual autonomy which is set within a social/community context; the importance of studentship and learning careers (drawing on the work of Bloomer (1997) and Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997; 1999)) which allow students to exert their influence over the curriculum; and the need for vocational studies, which are broadly conceived and allow for critical discussion about the nature of work as well as practical experience of the workplace.

The underlying vision in these proposals for a different curriculum for young people is of a learning society based on a new moral and political order, which emphasises participatory citizenship and active learning (Ranson, 1994), and which envisages a society based on 'more egalitarian, democratic and caring forms of social organisation' (Bates and Riseborough, 1993b, p.12). Coffield (1997) defines what this learning society would look like as follows:

> A learning society would be one in which all citizens acquire a high quality general education, appropriate vocational training and a job (or series of jobs) worthy of a human being while continuing to participate in education and training throughout their lives. A learning society would combine excellence with equity and would equip all its citizens with the knowledge, understanding and skills to ensure economic prosperity and much more besides. The attraction of the term 'the learning society' lies in the implicit promise not only of economic development but of regeneration of our whole public sphere. Citizens of a learning society would, by means of their continuing education and training, be able to engage in critical dialogue and action to improve the quality of life for the whole community and to ensure social integration as well as economic success. (Coffield, 1997, p.450)

This vision stands in contrast to the credentialist and social control models. However, such a vision is not unproblematic. Whilst it may offer important and worthwhile critical democratic goals to aspire to, the difficulty of relating such a conception of a learning society to the reality of day-to-day practice may turn it into a disabling as much as an enabling vision.

The range of different understandings of learning and the nature of a 'learning society' represented across the three models discussed above offer a basis for discerning differences in how the broad, vocational route has been defined and understood since the 1970s, and this forms the focus of the rest of the chapter. The credentialist model has strong resonance in government policy, where the perceived need to invest in human capital is predominant, and other goals appear to be subsumed

beneath the aim of developing a system of education and training which produces a highly-skilled workforce, capable of working in a 'knowledge economy' (Clarke, 2001).

Yet the realities of the economy belie the high skills rhetoric, and the social control model suggests that education and training may serve the purpose of preparing people for their position in a stratified labour market, whilst placing responsibility for that positioning on the individual. Ainley (1998) suggests that in this context the broad, vocational route may provide opportunities for young people not previously in any form of institutionalised learning to 'drift up' the system, but it also allows them to be 'cooled out' of it at a later stage (ibid, pp.568-9). These contradictions present uncertain ground for young people and their teachers, and it is perhaps not surprising that care and comfort zones (Ecclestone, 2001) may be key features of learning cultures in such a context.

The final model offers a vision which has formed an important part of the debate amongst academics over the past decade, concerning what a reformed system of initial post-compulsory education and training might entail. However, although this vision may feature in the opening rationale of Labour Government documents since 1997 (DfEE, 1998; DfEE, 1999a; DfES, 2002a; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999), in practice, it

continues to be remote from how the broad, vocational route is understood and implemented in practice.

The rest of this chapter examines the development of the broad, vocational route since the late 1970s. The function of broad, vocational education, from this time through to the introduction of GNVQs in the 1990s, reveals how the above tensions are played out in practice.

The precursors to GNVQ

The origins of the broad, vocational or 'vocationally-related' (QCA, 2000) route of the 1990s can be traced back to the recession and collapse of the youth labour market in the 1970s, which dramatically reduced the old apprenticeship system (Howieson et al, 1997). The response of the then Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, in his 1976 Ruskin Speech (Callaghan, 1976), was to ask why education was not producing young people with the skills employers wanted, and to argue that education should become more responsive to the needs of industry. His speech initiated the Great Debate about education, lasting from 1976 to 1979, and marked the beginnings of what became defined as the 'new vocationalism' (Bates et al, 1984; Chitty, 1991b; Dale, 1985b). While Callaghan's speech suggested that the government's goal was to increase opportunities and overcome inequalities, in practice, new, vocational

forms of education and training were created for young people who would not have stayed on in education or training in the past, while academic forms of education continued for a selected minority.

Although the problem was defined by Callaghan as a shortage of skills rather than a shortage of jobs, the schemes introduced in the 1970s, such as the Youth Opportunities Programme, launched in 1978 to run for five years, were associated predominantly with responding to youth unemployment, providing temporary measures and schemes which could be dismantled at the end of the recession (Roberts, 1990). However, by the early 1980s, the new vocational schemes and initiatives were no longer intended to be temporary solutions, but were designed to last (Roberts, Parsell and Connolly, 1989, p.5). Included in these initiatives were pre-vocational courses, which represent the precursors to GNVQs. Detailed accounts of the new vocationalism can be found elsewhere (Chitty, 1991a; Dale, 1985a; Gleeson, 1989, 1990; Hyland, 1999; Wellington, 1993). Here, the intention is to explore concerns about the nature and purpose of broad, vocational education which are relevant to perceptions of GNVQs in the 1990s.

Pre-vocational education in the 1980s

By the end of the 1970s, the kind of day-release apprenticeship training in FE colleges, researched by Gleeson and Mardle (1980), was much

reduced. In the wake of youth unemployment, a new constituency of young people appeared in colleges to fill this gap. They were described as 'pre-vocational' students (Green, 1991, p.91). These students were defined by government policy-makers as not yet ready to choose a vocational specialism, and as lacking general social and life skills, to the extent that they might be unemployable. They were also perceived as disaffected and bored with the academic curriculum. To respond to this new cohort of young people, a variety of training schemes and pre-vocational education courses were introduced. By the late 1980s, educational courses included the Certificate in Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE), BTEC First Diplomas, as well as a variety of other initiatives such as the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) (see Gleeson, 1989)[1]. The Further Education Unit Report *A Basis for Choice* (1979) is seen as an important influence on all these courses. Gleeson (1989) suggests that *A Basis for Choice* was influential, because it argued that repeated doses of a narrow academic curriculum which had failed young people were no longer appropriate, and it proposed curricular guidelines based on a core skills approach, which were intended to meet the needs of the 'vocationally uncommitted' (ibid, p.64).

The pre-vocational curriculum during the 1980s embraced a number of features. The emphasis was on the learning process, with little reference

[1] Advanced level courses such as BTEC National are seen as distinct from pre-vocational courses, and as more highly-regarded (see Pring, 1995; Sharp, 1998).

to specific knowledge content (Spours and Young, 1990). Courses were based on progressive pedagogies, involving greater student participation and active learning strategies. CPVE, for example, specified a range of activities that students must experience, which included work experience, experiential learning approaches, guidance, records of achievement, and negotiation over the curriculum (Stock and Conway, 1992). Instead of academic knowledge, a range of skills were introduced. Some of these were vocational; others were social and learning skills. Courses were modularised and staff were expected to work together as interdisciplinary teams on integrated projects.

While progressive approaches were intended to motivate young people to learn, the wider role and purpose of pre-vocational courses in the education and training system were less clear. Gleeson (1989, p.59) defines pre-vocational education as occupying 'an imprecise middle ground between academic and traditional training courses.' There was widespread criticism from academics about their ambiguous nature and unclear progression routes, and a consensus by the beginning of the 1990s from a wide constituency, which included government, industry and educationalists (Whiteside, 1992), that a more coherent system of qualifications was needed. To understand the role and purpose of GNVQs, which were introduced in response to the demand for reform, it is important to consider this legacy, for although GNVQs were heralded

as a break with the past (Jessup, 1991), they form part of a continuum of attempts to transform initial PCET, which continues with Curriculum 2000.

A rhetoric of skills growth and credentialism

The new vocationalism was built on claims by first the Labour and then the Conservative Government that there was a crisis in education caused by the progressive ideas of the 1960s, which had created anti-industrial attitudes and unrealistic expectations of working life (Brown, 1988). These claims were used to suggest that young people lacked the appropriate skills and attitudes for the labour market (Clarke and Willis, 1984), implying that the reason for youth unemployment was the poor supply of skills rather than insufficient demand for skills by business and industry (Cohen, 1984), and that the education system needed to change.

The rhetoric of the new vocationalism constructed education around vocational relevance and a credentialist model of learning. Education was defined as a key means of economic regeneration, which required strong functional links between education and the world of work (Williams and Raggatt, 1999). This was based on a number of premises. Firstly, fundamental changes to the economy and the labour market as a result of globalisation and new technologies required widescale changes to the education and training system. Secondly, the needs of industry

and employers were paramount in defining the changing purpose and content of education and training. Thirdly, the supply of skills was both the problem and the solution – the problem because individuals did not have the appropriate skills, the solution in that once individuals acquired relevant skills, demand in the labour market would follow. Fourthly, prolonged learning was essential, by extending the period of transition from school to work for young people, and subsequently, by defining learning as a lifelong enterprise – a continuing re-investment in human capital. Yet regardless of such claims, the sort of education and training that employers wanted, proved difficult to identify, despite numerous attempts to do so (Wellington, 1994). As Merson (1994) has argued, the immediate needs of employers were often for low-level skills, which contradicted the vision of a high skills future in government policy.

The reality: a system of social control?

Research and critiques related to the new vocationalism suggest that behind the skills growth rhetoric in education policy lay pressing concerns for the government that were more closely related to social control. The impact of the recession meant that there were no longer jobs for young people to move into straight from school (Roberts, Dench and Richardson, 1988). Finn (1991) and Chitty (1991b) identify two new roles which the government needed the education and training system to play

as a result of the collapse of the youth labour market. One was to maintain social stability by keeping young people occupied, the other was to ensure that young people would be employable when they did eventually get jobs. Education needed to develop positive attitudes towards industry, enterprise and work (Ball, 1999a). It also needed to instil a work ethic which would survive periods of unemployment, or in Dale's (1985b, p.7) words, to adjust young people to a new status 'somewhere between work and non-work'. Hickox (1995) and Holt and Reid (1988) suggest that features such as personal development were used to socialise young people into accepting the social control of the workplace 'in an unquestioning fashion.' (Holt and Reid, 1988, p.23) Lower level, pre-vocational courses in particular appeared to focus on inculcating the right attitudes and behaviour, such as punctuality, attendance, timekeeping and discipline, in preparation for low-paid, low-skills work (Chitty, 1991b).

Apparent attempts at social control through vocationalism were coupled with what appeared to be 'caring' goals. Vocationalism was promoted as a means of increasing the relevance of education to the changing student intake (Moore and Hickox, 1994), by using progressive approaches. Avis defines the essential features of progressivism as individualised, student-centred learning, with a focus on relevance and a concern to relate learning to the interests of the students, as a means of enhancing

motivation and willingness to learn. The process of learning is more important than the content of learning, and there is an emphasis on activity-based learning.

Although progressivism might appear to offer the potential to contribute to a social democratic vision of education (Gleeson, 1989; Hodkinson, 1991), Avis (1988) argues that progressive education is essentially apolitical, and that the new vocationalism highlighted this weakness. He believes that the new vocationalism appropriated progressive education, and depoliticised it by reducing it to a set of techniques which could be used to motivate young people. The emphasis on the individual tended to isolate students who were expected to pursue separate and autonomous development, thus ignoring considerations of collective development and the effects of social difference. The idea behind starting from where students were, was to build on student interest in order to move them to a higher level of understanding. However, Avis suggests that:

> The problem has been that much progressive education has failed to do this and has become trapped in the present, serving merely to confirm what the student already knew. (Avis, 1990, p.133)

Green (1986, cited in Gleeson, 1989) comments similarly:

> The danger of 'instant relevance' is that in its earnest desire to

> 'meet the kids where they are at', it ends up leaving them exactly there - in the case of working class kids, in working class jobs, excluded from the culture of power [...] Education without concepts and analytical tools is education for subordination. (Cited in Gleeson, 1989, p.39)

According to Avis, vocationalism allowed progressive education to be reworked within a rightwing framework in the 1980s, and used to develop a 'realistic and vocationally orientated approach' (Avis, 1988, p.110). Hodkinson (1991a) has challenged Avis's view that progressive education itself is fundamentally flawed and atheoretical, pointing to its roots in the theories of Dewey. He nevertheless concurs that progressive techniques have been used as an end in themselves.

For young people and their teachers, such contradictions presented uncertain ground. Clarke and Willis (1984) point out that even though an underlying intention may have been to promote social control and a certain view of society, skills and relevance to the world of work were nevertheless important and relevant to young people. Bates (1984) explores this issue further. She argues that the popularity of the world of work and skills teaching could be understood, given the absence of alternative solutions to the problem of motivation. For teachers and lecturers, progressive and informal pedagogies seemed more relevant to young people's concerns, and offered a coping strategy for managing classes of unenthusiastic students.

Bates points out that for academic students, traditional subjects are vocational in the sense that they provide the qualifications needed for progression up the educational ladder. For students defined as non-academic, she suggests that the development of vocationalism was in part a concession to their definitions of what was relevant and in their interests. Bates also observes that young people's interest in the vocational, skills curriculum may be because it is not cognitively demanding. There is no pressure to write, think hard or work alone, and it is perceived as easy compared with learning in traditional subjects (Bates, 1984).

Critiques of the nature of pre-vocational courses were coupled with concerns about progression. Low expectations meant that pre-vocational qualifications often excluded young people from progression to either vocational or academic studies, because they were not seen as adequate preparation for either (Young, 1998). Smithers and Robinson (1991) argue that students were not making progress, either because they were not achieving qualifications, or because they were only achieving qualifications at a level that was the same as expected outcomes at 16. They suggested that BTEC First would be better taught pre-16 as it was only the equivalent of GCSE and they criticised CPVE for lacking national recognition, and not leading naturally to any further studies.

The vision of an alternative: a social democratic model of learning

The reality of the new vocationalism has been defined by Moore (1990a, p.205) as an 'occupationalist vocationalism', geared towards preparation for working life in a narrow and instrumental way. He contrasts this with an alternative form of vocationalism constructed within an educationalist paradigm. Here, vocationalism would form part of broad, general education, and would involve knowledge about the world of work, rather than knowledge for the world of work, and would subject the world of work to critique and questioning. Moore and others (for example, Chitty, 1991b; Pring, 1991) have argued that an educational vocationalism thus conceived would form part of the curriculum for all young people.

The new vocationalism, in contrast, demonstrated deliberate targeting by government of particular forms of learning towards certain young people, to match the needs of different segments of the workforce (Chitty, 1991b). Gleeson (1989) argues that by targeting pre-vocational courses at young people perceived to be unemployable and of lower ability, pre-vocational education was identified as only for particular sorts of young people, and as a result, 'In the wider society pre-vocational courses have the stigma of being second rate.' (ibid, p.75)

Re-shaping the system for the 21st century

The critiques of the new vocationalism of the 1980s suggested that pre-vocational and broad, vocational courses were failing. They were failing to deliver the skills growth of government policy, and they were also failing to develop a more fair and equitable system of education and training for young people. In the second half of the 1980s, there were parallel concerns about other parts of the education and training system. There was extensive discussion about reform to A-levels (Richardson, 1993; Smithers, 1994). In vocational training, concerns to rationalise the system of vocational qualifications and ensure that all training led to qualifications, resulted in the setting up of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) in 1986 (Jessup, 1993; Spours, 1993).

These concerns can be seen as a reflection of the rising prominence of supply-side solutions to economic and labour market problems (Esland, Flude and Sieminski, 1999). The discussions and the momentum for reform were rooted in economic arguments, which drew on an optimistic vision of a post-Fordist economy (Avis, 1993). However, post-Fordism is subject to a variety of interpretations (Phillimore, 1990). It represents a move away from Fordist mass production, to new forms of flexible specialised production, which exploit new information technologies, and which require people who can generate and work with knowledge. Such

changes are believed to lead to flatter management structures and an emphasis on teamwork. Post-Fordism is also associated with a shift from manufacturing, to the provision of services - shops, offices, leisure - for particular market segments (Edwards, 1993). An optimistic interpretation of post-Fordist flexible specialisation suggests that such developments make 'quite new intellectual demands on employees at all levels.' (Young, 1993, p.213) Yet this contradicts evidence that for large parts of the labour force, flexibilisation means worsening conditions of employment, and a reduction in the skills required (Atkinson and Meagher, 1990).

The consensus for change to initial PCET at the end of the 1980s was built around an optimistic vision of the new work order, which would require broader and higher levels of skill across the whole of the workforce, and the belief that all parts of the system were inadequate to the development of a post-Fordist, post-industrial economy for the 21st century. There was agreement around the goals of increasing participation, raising achievement, and creating a coherent education and training system (Whiteside, 1992), and the general election of 1990 gave impetus to new ideas (Sharp, 1998).

The report published by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (Finegold et al, 1990) proposing a British Baccalaureat, has been identified

as one of the most influential contributions to the debate at this time (Richardson, 1993). The report recommended complete reform of the system. The authors argued that the problems facing initial post-compulsory education for 16 to 18 year olds were not the inadequacies of the separate routes, but the divided system itself (Young, 1993). They proposed a unified system of qualifications, leading to a single diploma, which would require all young people to take theoretical and applied modules as part of their overall programme. Such a curriculum, it was argued, would not separate the preparation of young people for employment from the role of preparing them to become citizens in a democratic society. The economic justification put forward for a unified system was the possibility of new forms of work organisation which would maximise the intellectual potential of all employees, and mean rewarding work for all. Principles of social justice and equity could, on this basis, sit comfortably with meeting the needs of the economy.

However, while the IPPR report enjoyed the support of the Labour Party, the Conservative Government which was re-elected at the beginning of the 1990s supported proposals for a new broad, vocational qualification (Richardson, 1993), rather than a unified curriculum embracing goals of critical citizenship and social justice, even if a new rhetoric of parity of esteem in education policy implied a concern for equity. In so doing, the problems raised by critics associated with the role and status of pre-

vocational and general vocational education as separate qualifications were ignored. The significance of this decision was that it served to perpetuate existing uncertainties and risks related to vocational education into the 1990s within a new broad vocational route.

GNVQs: a broad vocational route for the 21st century

The new qualification, the GNVQ, was proposed in the 1991 White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES, DE, WO, 1991).

According to the White Paper, GNVQs were aimed at young people who wanted to keep their career options open, by offering a general qualification, which focused on the application of knowledge in vocational contexts. They were intended to lead to employment or further and higher education. They were introduced in a rolling programme between 1992 and 1997 in 14 vocational areas and at three levels, Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced. In the first year (1992-1993) they were piloted at Intermediate and Advanced level only, in five vocational areas (Art and Design, Business, Health and Social Care, Leisure and Tourism and Manufacturing). With the exception of Manufacturing, these areas came to dominate the GNVQ route (FEDA et al, 1997), while Foundation level has never fitted easily into the systems

of progression and parity of esteem envisaged in official rhetoric.

They were intended to be learner-centred, with students taking control of their own learning. Assessment was largely by coursework, coupled with short end of unit tests. They emphasised the development of what were defined as broad, transferable skills. These included mandatory key skills in Communication, Application of Number and Information Technology. In addition, grading for assessment was based on learning skills including action planning, information seeking and handling, and evaluation, as well as on quality of outcomes. The model was based on a conviction on the part of NCVQ, that such skills represented an appropriate definition of 'broad transferable' and 'key' skills. Such conviction did not, however, reflect the contested nature of 'key' or 'broad transferable' skills, which remain highly problematic. Both the identification of key skills and the nature of transferability continue to be the focus of debate (see for example, Green, 1997b; Huddleston and Unwin, 1997; Keep and Mayhew, 1999; Payne, 1999).

Between 1993 and 2000, significant and numerous changes were made to the assessment model as problems and pressures arose (see Ecclestone, 2002). In addition, there was strong political pressure to align GNVQs and A-levels, in response to the *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds* undertaken for the government by Dearing (Dearing, 1996). The Dearing

Review was followed by a consultation exercise *Qualifying for Success* (DfEE, 1997) which led to the 1999 White Paper *Learning to Succeed: a New Framework for Post-16 Learning* (DfEE, 1999a), all of which prepared the way for the replacement of Advanced GNVQs with vocational A-levels (Advanced Vocational Certificates in Education) in 2000. GNVQs at Foundation and Intermediate level are under review, but will continue until at least 2005. However, in September 2002, Part One GNVQs, which are offered at key stage 4 in schools, were replaced by vocational GCSEs.

Policy goals of skills growth and credentialism

The overt aims of government policy were to increase participation and raise achievement in initial PCET (DES, ED, WO, 1991), and particularly to encourage a higher proportion of young people to stay in full-time education beyond the end of compulsory schooling. These aims were closely connected to goals of economic prosperity, and visions of a post-Fordist high skills economy. The emphasis in government policy was on the achievement of credentials, which was given added impetus through the creation of national targets for education and training which coincided with the introduction of GNVQs (Sutton, 1994).

The government proposed to achieve the above aims by creating parity of esteem between the academic and the vocational routes. The problematic nature of the vocational route was to be addressed through much greater

central control of the vocational curriculum, which had previously remained largely unregulated (Yeomans, 1998). Alongside these goals, were the hopes of educationalists who argued for a system of initial PCET which would achieve goals of participatory citizenship, based on principles of social justice and equity (see for example Avis et al, 1996b). GNVQs therefore faced pressure to match academic 'standards', associated both with achieving levels of knowledge and skill drawn from clear foundations and hierarchies of subject knowledge, and with an assessment system intended to discriminate between students' achievement, rather than recognise the achievement of all those who met pre-specified outcomes (Ecclestone, 2002). At the same time, they were supposed to provide a high quality 'technical' route, and to provide a basis for the development of a more equitable and eventually unified system.

GNVQs were introduced to replace qualifications such as CPVE, BTEC First and BTEC National (though BTEC Nationals have remained and are regaining prominence once more). However, their design reversed the trend of the 1980s, where the learning experience that young people should have was specified, rather than the outcomes they should achieve (Hodkinson, 1991), and demonstrated a new emphasis on outcomes and assessment typical of the late 1980s/early 1990s (Yeomans, 1998). Responsibility for the design of the qualification was given to NCVQ, led

by Gilbert Jessup, then Director of Research and Development at NCVQ. NCVQ had been set up in 1986 to sort out the 'jungle' (Sutton, 1992) of workplace vocational qualifications and was now asked to create a coherent broad, vocational route. Compared with curriculum developments of the 1980s, such as TVEI and CPVE, Sharp (1998) defines GNVQ as a top-down innovation, which did not, however, reflect a unity of interests at policy level, according to Ecclestone (2002), who refers to:

> the *ad hoc*, rushed, even chaotic, development of the assessment specifications combined with fraught internecine turf wars between awarding bodies and other constituencies. (ibid, p.60)

NCVQ was given extensive control over the qualification design, which allowed Jessup to apply his outcomes model, developed for occupationally-specific National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in the 1980s, to GNVQs.

The model was based on the detailed specification of outcomes and assessment requirements, which students achieved through the collection of a portfolio of evidence. Assessment was separated from learning programmes and methods, which were supposed to be negotiated by students. For Jessup (1995a; 1995b), a clear and transparent assessment system was the key to achieving a valued and respected general vocational route, and an important means of handing more control to the

student.

The centrality of the learner was fundamental to the GNVQ model (NCVQ, 1995a). While the outcomes of the qualification were tightly defined, the way the outcomes should be met were not specified. It was intended that students would choose and plan how they learned and the pace at which they learned. They were to take an active role in assessment by collecting and presenting evidence to show they had covered the outcomes. Active learning in GNVQs thus meant not just 'learning by doing' and applied learning, but taking responsibility for organising learning, and recording and presenting evidence.

The content of GNVQs was based on a classification of occupations or employment sectors, derived from an analysis of the needs of a particular occupational grouping, and quite deliberately avoided 'academic' subject areas derived from knowledge disciplines traditional to universities (Jessup, 1995a; NCVQ, 1995a). Jessup attempted to strengthen the link between the workplace and GNVQs, by describing them as providing the skills, knowledge and understanding which would underpin a range of NVQs within a broad, occupational area. The main way in which they were supposed to provide breadth was through key skills units. NCVQ defined these as the skills 'which are common and fundamental to performance in a wide range of activities in employment and life in

general.' (NCVQ, 1995a, p.17) Jessup made much of their role, suggesting that they could be seen as 'the most important feature of the qualification.' (Jessup, 1995b, p.10) As far as Jessup was concerned, 'GNVQs place greater emphasis on application and the development of skills than on general or academic education.' (ibid, p.9) His understanding of the development of key and generic skills suggested that managing and recording learning were at least as important as acquiring vocational knowledge (Jessup, 1991). For Edwards (1997, p.19), this meant that the purpose of GNVQs was to provide 'a systematic training in how to learn' alongside the application of knowledge and skills in a broadly vocational environment. The model thus constituted a paradoxical mix of prescription and autonomy; outcomes were highly specified, but the model was claimed to promote learner independence and autonomy.

Jessup's model was pursued by NCVQ with what Spours (1997, p.57) describes as 'missionary zeal'. Sharp (1998), who interviewed key policy makers, including Jessup, about the development of GNVQs, believes that 'the influence of Jessup was pervasive' (ibid, p.305). He explains that Jessup did much of the thinking, wrote papers and reports and drafted the criteria for the proposals, and that 'GNVQs, in essence, took the particular forms that they did because Gilbert Jessup constructed them that way' (ibid, p.305). He suggests that 'In many respects [Jessup] was

convinced that this particular model was the panacea to solve all the ills of the education and training system.' (ibid, p.305)

Sharp goes on to observe that the qualification could have been developed with a much lighter regulatory touch than was imposed. He notes that BTEC had hoped to adapt their First and National Diplomas to fit the new system, and observes that the growth of BTEC National Diploma courses was the major success of the 1980s. BTEC qualifications were considered to have their own shortcomings; they were perceived to suffer from 'erratic and unrigorous 'standards' '(Ecclestone, 2002, p.70), and Bates (1990) and Riseborough (1993) argue that they were geared towards socialising young people into future job roles, rather than developing critical knowledge and understanding. Nevertheless, for young people, their strength was that they were recognised by employers, and accepted by a number of institutions as a vocational alternative to A-levels for entry into higher education. However, Jessup insisted that it was not possible to convert existing qualifications into a GNVQ (though, subsequently, a system of kitemarking existing qualifications was initiated for the new entry level, introduced in 1997).

Studies of GNVQ

Much of the literature on GNVQs has concentrated on the effects of the design model and on whether GNVQs have been able to meet the policy

goals set for them, and has therefore focused on issues related to implementation, parity of esteem, and increasing participation and raising achievement. A dominant concern has been assessment, and the crisis created by the GNVQ assessment model (Spours, 1995), which resulted in a national review by Capey in 1995 (Capey, 1995) and three major changes to the assessment model.

The original model used portfolios of achievement as the main method of assessment, with short, end-of-unit, external multiple choice tests. Students were expected to cover all the outcomes in the qualification specification, and there was considerable emphasis on students planning and managing their own learning. In 1995, the first changes to the model provided more detail in the specifications, in the form of guidance for assessment, and evidence indicators, which listed the type of evidence required to meet the specifications. The grading criteria were reduced, and whereas grading had been based on processes such as information-seeking and handling, and evaluation, grading was now extended to include the quality of outcomes. In 1996, further changes reduced the coursework assessment burden and introduced externally set and moderated assignments. The emphasis was increasingly on summative rather than formative assessment. Finally, the 2000 model, which formed part of Curriculum 2000 reforms, placed greater emphasis on external testing, and assignments designed and moderated by the Qualifications

and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and awarding bodies, and replaced grades of distinction, merit and pass, with grades A, C and E. In place of the previous emphasis on 'real life' assignments, application of theory to different scenarios was introduced. All these changes reflected conflict and contestation amongst policy makers around the role and positioning of GNVQs in the wider qualifications framework (Ecclestone, 2002).

Throughout the 1990s, reports of college provision by the Further Education and Funding Council (FEFC) (FEFC, 1994; 1995), and school provision by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (Ofsted, 1993; 1994; 1996; 1998) as well as their joint report in 1999 (Ofsted and FEFC, 1999), have focused on the implementation of the assessment model. These reports found that the GNVQ system allowed learning to be interpreted as no more than the collection of a sufficient quantity of evidence, and that mapping and recording of coverage often took precedence over competence and achievement. Gathering, organising and recording evidence were found to take up an 'inordinate' amount of time (FEFC, 1995, p.20), and Ofsted inspectors found regular examples of students copying material directly from other sources, which students believed was a valid means of meeting the GNVQ requirements (Ofsted, 1998). A great deal of concern was expressed that GNVQs at Advanced level, and even more so at Intermediate level, often failed to match the 'standards' of A-level and GCSE achievement.

A second area which has received extensive attention has been the issue of parity of esteem (see Edwards et al, 1997; Gleeson and Hodkinson, 1995; Hyland, 1994; Hodkinson and Mattinson, 1994; Smithers, 1994, 1999; Steedman and Rudd, 1998; Wallace, 1997). Jessup's approach to achieving parity, through a framework which aligned qualifications at different levels, has led to persistent concerns about the equivalence of academic and vocational knowledge and skills and about educational 'standards' (Sharp, 1998). This was demonstrated most strongly in an attack on NCVQ's approach by Smithers in the early 1990s, which was the subject of a Channel 4 documentary (Smithers, 1993).

Concern about parity has focused interest on the Advanced level of GNVQ. As Sharp (1998) observes, Intermediate and Foundation level were not part of the parity equation and little detailed attention has been given to the role and purpose of Intermediate and Foundation level GNVQs. Negative comments about Intermediate level in inspection reports (Ofsted, 1993; FEFC, 1994; FEFC, 1995; Ofsted and FEFC, 1999) and the almost total absence of any comments about Foundation level have led to little critical scrutiny. Instead, both policy interest and the research literature have been dominated by a concern with Advanced GNVQs (Barry, 1997; Bates, 1998; Ecclestone, 2002; Edwards et al, 1997; Hodkinson, 1998; Hodkinson and Mattinson, 1994; Smith, J., 1998; Smith, V., 1997; Smithers, 1994).

In addition to assessment and parity of esteem, the wider goals set for GNVQs in the 1991 White Paper have been investigated in a national survey of GNVQ Intermediate and Advanced from 1993-1997 by Wolf (FEU et al, 1994; FEDA et al, 1995; FEDA et al, 1997). The survey was highly critical of the extent to which GNVQs were achieving policy aims, and voiced particular concern about the vocational nature of GNVQs. Wolf (1997) described as 'disturbing' the dominance of four humanities-based GNVQs, which between them recruited over three-quarters of GNVQ students at both Intermediate and Advanced Levels, for a qualification which was supposed to represent a broad range of vocational areas, and help to develop technological and scientific skills. She suggested that 'If GNVQs are providing adequately for the future workforce, then one must presume that it is a workforce with little role for technical skills as they have traditionally been understood.' (FEDA et al, 1997, p.98) She found that GNVQs' main purpose was seen as providing access to further and higher education. Even though employment was the destination for a considerable number of GNVQ students, GNVQs were not seen as preparation for this, and where students did enter employment, it tended to be in retail, hospitality or catering, regardless of GNVQ area studied.

The goals of increasing participation and raising achievement have been a further area of attention in the literature. Research into initial PCET in

the 1980s concluded that the decision to leave full-time education was usually a 'one-way ticket' out of the system (Gray, Jesson and Tranmer, 1993, p.17), so that ensuring young people stayed on beyond 16 was an important goal in the 1990s. In addition, the link in government policy between economic competitiveness and education and training placed great emphasis on the achievement of certificated outcomes.

However, participation has stayed at around 70% throughout the 1990s (DfEE, 1999b). This is a cause for concern, since it represents only a medium-participation system, compared to other European countries, where participation rates are between 85 and 90 per cent (Hodgson and Spours, 1997). Furthermore, there is a drop-off in participation after one year, so that the number of 17 year olds in full-time education between 1993 and 1998 has remained lower, at 58 per cent, and the number of 18 year olds lower still, at just above 37 per cent (DfEE, 1999b). Evidence that GNVQs have not helped to address these concerns, but added to the problem (Payne, 1998, 2001; Spours, 1997; Wolf, 1997) has led to studies which have investigated factors affecting participation and achievement, geared to finding solutions to the problem (Davies et al, 1998; FEDA, 1998; Martinez and Munday, 1998; Maychell and Evans et al, 1998).

A failure to match social democratic ideals

Alongside the above literature, there has been a small amount of research

by educationalists interested in whether GNVQs provide a basis for the development of a more equitable and unified system, with opportunities for empowerment and critical citizenship.

Bloomer (1998) discusses the nature of knowledge and progressive practice in GNVQs, and argues that GNVQs use the language of progressivism to hide a technical rationalist approach to learning and assessment. He suggests that learning in GNVQs is heavily constrained by meeting assessment requirements, which means that learning involves students in a treasure hunt for information, rather than engaging critically with the information they collect. Learning in GNVQs amounts to what he describes as knowledge-taking rather than knowledge-making.

In a similar way, Bates (1998) explores how students and teachers experience the notion of independent learning in GNVQs. She sees GNVQ pedagogy as revolving around 'a project of individualisation and self-responsibilisation' (ibid, p.191), which is constrained by the detailed control of content and standards. She believes that GNVQs aim to transfer responsibility, not power, and involve a highly prescribed form of imposed autonomy for students. However, she suggests that students resist the responsibility placed on them to manage and organise their work, which turns them into 'hunters and gatherers' of information (ibid,

pp.193-194), and argues that students reclaim their power by rejecting the responsibility which GNVQs require of them, and forcing teachers to resume control.

Helsby and colleagues (Helsby et al, 1998; Knight et al, 1998) also explore the nature of independence in GNVQs, and they too conclude that empowerment in GNVQ means having responsibility for learning pre-determined content, rather than having control over the content of learning itself. They suggest that GNVQs mirror a workplace human resource management (HRM) model, where individual empowerment is seen as an important means of maximising human resources and releasing creative potential in the interests of a company or business. Employees are expected to demonstrate flexibility, enterprise, responsibility and self-reliance, but as with GNVQs, workers are given responsibility for completing pre-specified work, rather than any wider autonomy. The framework of values, targets, resources and tasks within which they operate are determined by employers and senior managers, who represent a small elite of highly-skilled core workers. Helsby et al argue that the rhetoric of empowerment in both GNVQs and the new managerial work order 'can mask practices which are in reality disempowering, encouraging conformity and self-surveillance.' (Helsby et al, 1998, p.63)

Ecclestone (2002) explores whether the assessment processes in GNVQs provide opportunities for students to develop greater autonomy. In contrast to the work of Bloomer, Bates and Helsby et al, she finds that well-motivated students do develop their autonomy, albeit in limited ways, and that students value studying GNVQ as a chance to build their confidence and to make progress towards their goals for the future.

The above work shares an underlying concern to explore how GNVQs may contribute to goals of empowerment, social justice and critical citizenship. The researchers cited here view the opportunity for teachers and students to exert any form of agency on their educational experience as severely limited, resulting ultimately in various forms of acceptance and compliance. Overall, they judge GNVQs negatively, in so far as agency is seen as unable to overcome structural conditions and therefore unable to lead to forms of empowerment congruent with a vision of an equitable and democratic society.

An alternative vision for the 21st century: social democratic models of initial PCET

There has been extensive work by academics on what a fair and equitable system of initial PCET might entail. Work on a unified qualifications system by Spours, Young and colleagues (Cramphorn et al, 1997; Howieson et al, 1997; Spours and Young, 1996, 1997) since the publication

of *A British Baccalaureat* (Finegold et al, 1990) has played an increasingly influential role since New Labour came to power. Spours, Young and colleagues anticipate that a unified system may be achieved in steps and stages, and see the reforms of A-levels and Advanced GNVQs (now Advanced Vocational Certificates in Education) as a result of Curriculum 2000, as a step further down the road (Hodgson and Spours, 1999; Raffe et al, 1998).

Their commitment to a unified curriculum is based on the belief that entitlement for all cannot be achieved through a semblance of choice within a diversified system, drawing on evidence that broad, vocational education within a system of choice is perceived publicly as inferior to academic education, and is associated with low achievers (Spours, 1997; Spours and Young, 1990; Young et al, 1997). Evidence of who takes GNVQs (FEDA et al, 1997; White et al, 1996; Ofsted and FEFC, 1999) confirms that the broad, vocational route of the 1990s has maintained this stratification. However, there is an added twist with GNVQs. The different levels embrace a wide diversity of young people, from 'borderline' A-level students taking Advanced, to students deemed to have failed in their previous school education, who take Foundation and Intermediate level.

There have been numerous proposals from 'democratic' educationalists

promoting democracy and empowerment, for what a unified curriculum for initial PCET might look like (Avis et al, 1996b; Green, 1997a; Halliday, 1996; Hyland, 1999; Merson, 1995; Moore and Young, 2001; Young, 1998). All emphasise that initial PCET should take the form of a broad general education, which is not narrowly subject or occupation specific. It would include aspects of what are currently designated the 'academic' and 'vocational' curriculum, as a means of increasing breadth of knowledge and experience, and would include both practical and theoretical learning. It would be intended to help young people develop a critical understanding of the world, including the world of work.

Bloomer (1997) believes that flexible specialisation leads to the need for not only an end to the academic-vocational divide but also an end to subject specialist demarcations, leading to a broader base of more integrated knowledge. This would emphasise the interdependency of specialisms, and the use and application of knowledge in practical contexts, recognising the importance of situated knowledge and learning. A move away from 'the historical insulation of communities of practitioners' (ibid, p.200) would be required to allow for a more integrated approach to knowledge and skills.

These writers also believe that the curriculum cannot be viewed in isolation from the wider political, economic and policy context in which

education and training take place. Power structures in society need to be acknowledged and wider inequalities made explicit. Education and training which aims to empower learners is fundamental to their conceptualisation of the curriculum, but they see empowerment of the individual as part of challenging the power structures in society, with the aim of achieving wider social and economic equality for all. Not only is current practice seen to fall far short of such a 'democratic' agenda, but the researchers cited here argue that this agenda can only be achieved as part of wider changes beyond the arena of education and training.

However, notions of social justice and active citizenship do not fit easily with the present culture of performativity in education, with its emphasis on achieving measurable targets, and where accountability in teaching and learning is defined as following prescribed content and methods in curriculum 'delivery' (Gleeson and Hodkinson, 1995). The proposals discussed above emphasise the importance of curriculum processes and how particular subject matter is interpreted and require those involved in education and training to think in different terms to the predominant and all-pervading outcomes model of the curriculum. They do not offer an easily comparable alternative to the unit specifications of a GNVQ or an A-level syllabus, for they envisage fundamental change.

In considering what such proposals might look like in practice, Green

(1997) warns that lessons from previous experience should be heeded. He points out that part of the reason that the English system has looked to GNVQ is because of the failure of general, humanities education to motivate and interest young people who were not committed to the academic pathway. In his work on comparative education, Green has found that students in European countries do not necessarily like being forced to continue studying a range of general education subjects post-16 either.

Green (1997, p.101) proposes a post-16 curriculum which has a common core of general education and includes three broad components: English (communications) and maths (numeracy); civic or citizenship education (political literacy, environmental awareness, international understanding and social responsibility); science and foreign languages (which Green suggests would have to be alternatives as English students have difficulties with these).

This listing of 'subjects' suggests that a unified structure will not automatically achieve the integrated curriculum proposed by Bloomer. Green counteracts this by arguing that a student-centred and critical pedagogy in itself is not sufficient to achieve effective learning and increased educational equality. His list serves to highlight the difficulties of shifting from conceptualisation to practice. In the present context, it is

much easier to discuss the possible merits of 'subjects' such as science and languages, and to agree with the importance of communication, numeracy and information technology skills, than it is to visualise a unified general academic-vocational curriculum. The latter demands that curriculum designers and practitioners acknowledge the importance of the value system underlying the curriculum, and the effect this has on curriculum processes. Developing a unified curriculum in steps and stages as outlined by Spours, Young and colleagues (Raffe et al, 1998) may allow time to put more fundamental changes into practice, but it is also likely to struggle against innovation overload for practitioners, and may be reduced to the identification of a new list of agreed subjects or units of study, especially as it has to operate in the context of a system built around measuring pre-defined outcomes.

Summary

This chapter has examined the development of the broad, vocational route in the English education system, from the precursors to GNVQs of the 1980s, through to the introduction and development of GNVQs in the 1990s. Drawing on three models taken from the literature on lifelong learning, the chapter has aimed to contrast between policy rhetoric, and the reality of young people's experience of initial PCET. Set against policy and practice, are alternative visions for initial PCET, put forward

by academics who may be loosely defined as 'democractic' educationalists.

This contestation over broad, vocational education highlights the ambiguous position of GNVQs as a middle pathway, straddling the divide between the academic and the vocational in the English qualifications system. They have remained a hybrid, a contradiction and a paradox (Gleeson and Hodkinson, 1995; Hodkinson and Mattinson, 1994; Spours, 1997), representing the focal point for a diversity of interests from politicians, academics, practitioners and young people. Such contestation has implications for this present study into how GNVQs contribute to the construction of young people's transitions from compulsory schooling to adult life. The optimistic policy goals of high skills and parity of esteem contrast with a much more pessimistic analysis amongst academics of continuing structural inequality, and vocational learning as a form of social control. Young people and their teachers appear to be caught between the two, and the vision of an equitable system, based on social justice and active citizenship, may seem even further from their experience than the high skills rhetoric of government policy. For the students and lecturers in this case study, these conflicts and contradictions meant that, although GNVQs may have offered the opportunity of a second chance to achieve educational credentials, that chance was bound up with risk and uncertainty about

the value attached to GNVQs in the outside world.

Chapter 3

Theorising post-school transitions and learning in initial PCET

Introduction

The changes discussed in the previous chapter in relation to qualifications reform and the nature of the broad, vocational route have had a profound effect on young people's post-school transitions. This chapter explores how researchers have theorised these changes in terms of young people's transitions, and learning in initial PCET. Drawing on a range of literature the chapter discusses the theoretical framework used to analyse the data collected in the case study. The first part of the chapter explores how a context of risk and uncertainty is changing the nature of young people's post-school transitions. The second part of the chapter discusses how researchers have made sense of learning in initial PCET. This section examines the concept of learning careers, and how social and cultural capital form an important part of understanding young people's transitions. The use of different typologies to explore transition behaviour and young people's orientations to learning is also discussed. The final part of the chapter relates this research to the current

study, and discusses a model for understanding young people's experience in Midlands College.

A context of risk and uncertainty for post-16 transitions

The end of compulsory schooling at 16 continues to be a critical turning point for young people. However, rather than the certainty of following one of a small number of established trajectories (Banks et al, 1992; Bynner and Roberts, 1991), young people are now making the transition into a world which many see as characterised by risk and uncertainty (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990). The term trajectory has been used in the past to indicate the way that transition tended to follow a small number of standard patterns. Most young people ended their education and training at the end of compulsory schooling and made a direct transition into work, while a minority extended their transition through further education or training. By the 1980s, following the collapse of the youth labour market, the transition from school to work became redefined as extended and complex for the majority of young people, involving a process of two or more steps to make the move into work (Gray and Sime, 1989). Transition routes were detached from the labour market, and the link to future employment was much less clear. Transitions were increasingly described as fragmented and unpredictable (Furlong, 1992).

Whereas extended transitions were traditionally associated with professional occupations, which required further education and training, they now included education and training schemes, which led to new forms of employment. Hollands (1991) identifies the emergence of new forms of transition, which were increasingly based around notions of individual career, social mobility and the enterprise culture. Brown (1988) suggests that as former job opportunities disappeared, young people saw educational qualifications as a means of getting some sort of job, in the hope that unemployment would happen to people who did not make an effort. Banks et al (1992) concur. In their research, they found that:

> The realities of changing labour market opportunities were compelling more to stay on than in the past. More of the younger cohort were having to take post-16 education and training seriously as a preliminary to getting a job. (Banks et al, 1992, p.40)

Yet in reality, many of the opportunities led to low-skilled and poorly paid employment, or resulted in unemployment (Roberts, 1993).

Despite the increasing diversity of routes at 16, Furlong's (1992) study of young people's transitions from school to work, based on a quantitative analysis of data from the Scottish Young People's Survey in the mid-1980s, concluded that:

> the structure of opportunities for young people has not changed radically over the last couple of decades. While there are certainly a greater variety of pathways which young people may follow from school to work, the system is no more open for most young people than previously: social class affects educational outcomes, and qualifications still have a powerful influence on labour market experiences. (Furlong, 1992, p.10)

In the 1990s, Furlong and Cartmel (1997) come to the same conclusion:

> the greater range of opportunities available helps to obscure the extent to which existing patterns of inequality are simply being reproduced in different ways. (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, p.7)

The work of Beck (1992, 1998) and Giddens (1990, 1991, 1994) has been used by researchers into youth transitions to develop understandings of the changing context in which these new patterns are emerging (see for example Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000; Evans, Behrens and Kaluza, 2000; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Hall and Raffo, 1999). Beck and Giddens use the concepts of risk and individualisation to understand the complexities and uncertainties which people now face in their lives. For both Beck and Giddens, major transformations are taking place in societies across the world. In Western society, the certainties of the industrial era are at an end, and scientific knowledge is no longer trusted as the basis for progress. In their place is a society filled with potential risk, both on a global scale and on an individual level. For Beck, risk is particularly associated with scientific and technological developments,

which affect everyone's lives.

Both academics believe that part of the dissolution of industrial society is the breaking down of traditional social forms, such as the family, gender roles and class allegiances, which no longer help to make sense of the risk society. In this 'post-traditional' or late modern social order (Giddens, 1994, p.4), established support networks have lost much of their meaning, so that social relationships and social networks have to be individually chosen, and social ties have to be established, maintained and constantly renewed by individuals. As a result, individuals are forced to take far greater responsibility for negotiating their way in the world. In Beck's words, 'the individual must [...] conceive of him/herself as the center of action, as the planning office with respect to her/his own biography' (Beck, 1992, p.135). Giddens (1994) makes a similar observation, stating that 'In a post-traditional order, individuals more or less have to engage with the wider world if they are to survive in it.' (Giddens, 1994, p.7)

For Beck and Giddens, the new risks and opportunities in late modern society mean that individuals are held more accountable for their own survival. A diversification of lifestyles appears to have replaced older traditional social relationships. Beck sees the processes of individualisation as creating new social identities, which lead to new relationships, where individuals have to fend for themselves in order to

survive. According to Beck: 'For the sake of economic survival, individuals are now compelled to make themselves the center of their own life plans and conduct.' (Beck, 1992, p.92)

Giddens believes that the increasing individualisation of experience requires people to become much more reflexive about their own lives, and some writers, such as Quicke (1996) and Bloomer (1997), now argue that the fundamental purpose of education is to develop individual agency, which will enable the reflexive construction of personal identity. Although this could imply the pursuit of self-interest, Giddens sees reflexivity as providing the possibility of developing individual agency, and a means of breaking free from the reproduction of traditional patterns of inequality. While neither Beck nor Giddens suggest that inequalities of race, gender and class have disappeared, they argue that the breakdown of traditional structures fractures patterns of structural inequality and can make them less visible. Inequality is increasingly individualised, and individuals are made to feel responsible for their own positioning in society. Yet, Beck argues, risk adheres to a class pattern, with greater risk accumulating lower down the class structure.

Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) believe that the concept of individualisation has positive connotations but also possible drawbacks. If individuals must reflexively produce their own biographies, new social

identities can be created, but there are considerable risks as well as opportunities. They argue that in government policy, individualisation has become linked to an ideology of individualism, which has come to dominate political and economic culture (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000). They define individualism as part of a culture and ideology of neo-liberalism and economic individualism, encouraging the defence of private interest rather than public good and the freedom of the market, which cast the political subject as an individual who makes consumer choices, who can be comprehended without reference to society. Entrepreneurial and individualist traditions have become the basis of political thinking. Choice becomes an individual responsibility, including responsibility for bad or wrong choices. They suggest that structural inequalities are obscured by the combination of this culture of economic individualism, and the notion that identity formation is now an individualised project.

The role of learning, education and training

There is widespread agreement that learning and knowledge are increasingly important for survival in these changing times, implying a coincidence of interest between government, industry and individuals (Avis, 2000; Ball, 1999; Clarke and Newman, 1997). Amidst the uncertainties of the risk society, high levels of knowledge and skills are

seen as the way to ensure economic survival (Beck, 1992), to maintain social stability and social cohesion (Brine, 1999), and to achieve personal fulfilment (Giddens, 1991).

At the same time, individuals are made increasingly responsible for their own futures. They are encouraged to think of themselves as consumers, who have entitlements and expectations, rather than as citizens, with rights and responsibilities (Ball, 1994). They are expected to ensure that they get lifelong learning in a marketplace of opportunities throughout their lives (Edwards, 2000). They are responsible for finding employment and gaining the knowledge and skills to make themselves employable, while government and industry are presented as providing encouragement to individuals but not bearing overall responsibility (Stronach, 1989).

In this context young people have to negotiate their way through such uncertainties individually rather than collectively, and they are increasingly held accountable for their own fates. They are expected to make independent and rational career decisions about their own future, within a system of education and training which offers a complex array of opportunities, based on notions of choice and diversity, which in practice are often illusory (Halsall, 1996). As a result, Furlong and Cartmel (1997) believe that:

> while labour market outcomes are best described in terms of continuity rather than change, young people face these routes with a growing sense of unease and insecurity. (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, pp.8-9)

The differing opportunities available do not offer equal chances for the future, and Unwin (1999) likens the choices young people have to negotiate to a form of jungle-trekking. Vocational education, the focus of this study, has an ambiguous and varying status in comparison to other routes, demonstrated in evidence from a range of studies of post-school transitions (Avis, 1991; Bates et al, 1984; Bynner and Roberts, 1991; Coles, 1988a). Pre-vocational courses such as CPVE have had low status and were often taken by young people because there were no real job opportunities (Evans and Heinz, 1991). In contrast, BTEC National has enjoyed higher status, and has been taken by young people who make a positive choice to continue with full-time education. BTEC has been seen as a means to enhance the opportunity of finding skilled work, or as a route into higher education via a vocational rather than an academic route (Behrens and Brown, 1991).

However, all vocational education routes have remained inferior to academic education. Gleeson (1989) notes that even the more prestigious vocational courses have tended to be seen as a second chance and second choice route into higher education and employment. They not only

provide no direct link to employment, but their future currency in the labour market is at best ambiguous. As researchers from the 16-19 Initiative research project have observed:

> There is absolutely no question that British employers respect mainstream educational qualifications. These are used not as proof that the holders possess specific vocational skills so much as signals of general ability and personal qualities such as self-discipline and industriousness. (Roberts, Siweck and Parsell, 1989, p.11)

Payne (1995) therefore believes that those who stay in full-time education are better advised to do academic rather than vocational courses, if they want to gain further qualifications and higher earnings as adults.

Young people appear to be aware of the unequal choices they face, but voice the hope that staying on in education will enable them to obtain more qualifications, to get a better job, and to go on to higher or advanced education. Raffe et al (1998) note how the rise in young people's educational and occupational aspirations are resulting in extended participation, credential inflation and the growing preference of students for higher-status academic programmes. White et al's (1996) research for the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1996), which investigated young people's perceptions of 16-19 qualifications, also found that the main reason cited for staying on was employment considerations:

> Students perceived that their chances of obtaining more desirable employment would improve with post-GCSE qualifications. (White et al, 1996, p.16)

Gray, Jesson and Tranmer (1993) suggest that such responses reflect the driving forces of the system, which are the processes of securing qualifications with some market value, and converting them into employment opportunities.

GNVQs form part of this framework of consumer choice. They are defined as an alternative to academic qualifications, for students who prefer more practical approaches to learning (Dearing, 1996; Edwards, 1997). Yet although they appear to offer a ladder of progression, GNVQs also encapsulate differing purposes. At Foundation level they could be described as a remedial qualification; at Intermediate level their purpose is uncertain except to keep options open. Only Advanced level claims to offer a clear progression route into skilled employment or higher education, and then, as Wolf (FEDA et al, 1997) points out, mainly into vocational courses in new universities.

However, as a new qualification, there is little formal knowledge on which to draw to confirm whether such claims are true, and certainly no bank of first hand knowledge on which to base any judgement. Furthermore, although young people face a rhetoric that they should stay in education, studying post-16 may be very different from their parents' experience, and may therefore represent a step into the unknown.

Furlong and Cartmel (1997) observe that:

> Having parents who experienced very different transitions, young people often perceive the process as filled with risk and uncertainty. (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, p.38)

Bates (1990; Bates in Banks et al, 1992) observes the same problem for BTEC fashion design students in her study of the late 1980s. Although she finds that parents encourage their children's decision to stay in education, and provide financial support and space in which to study, parents are not necessarily knowledgeable about future opportunities:

> while parents of students in this group seemed keen to invest in their careers, they had little knowledge of opportunities in fashion design and could not assess the value of the course or the realism of their children's goals. (Bates in Banks et al, 1992, p.91)

For such young people, post-16 transitions are even more of a 'risky voyage' (Evans et al, 2000, p.124), than for others.

Making sense of learning in initial PCET

Learning careers

As transition has become more complex and individualised, there has been a growing body of research which investigates how young people negotiate their way towards adult life. In initial PCET, the concept of

learning careers has been developed by Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999, 2000) combining the work of Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson (1996) on career decision-making, and Bloomer's (1997) work on studentship. Bloomer and Hodkinson define learning career as:

> the ongoing unfolding of a person's dispositions to, and their engagement with, knowledge and learning opportunities. (ibid, 1997, p.7)

The concept of learning career draws on Bourdieu's notion of habitus.

Habitus refers to:

> the strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations ... a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks. (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.18)

The impact of social and cultural experience, particularly social conditions of class, are considered to have a major impact on individuals' ways of thinking, their values and their behaviour. Habitus influences how individuals perceive things and how they subsequently act, which leads them to both reproduce their social conditions, but also to transform them (Bloomer, 1997).

An individual's dispositions to learning are formed out of the interrelationship of habitus, personal identity, life history, social and

cultural contexts, actions and learning (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999, pp.57-58). Dispositions are related to perceptions of the nature of knowledge, and assessment of the value which that knowledge holds for a young person personally. They involve views about the purpose of learning in a given context, and evaluations of the learning activity as a means of acquiring knowledge.

In response to criticism of Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which has been criticised for its over-deterministic view of human growth and development, Bloomer emphasises that habitus is not fixed, but is subject to change over time. For Bloomer, habitus shapes and circumscribes students' predispositions and dispositions to learning. It influences how students give meaning to their experience of learning, but it can change, so that a disposition to learning is not fixed permanently, but can alter as a result of the life history of an individual, which itself is influenced by external structures and individual actions or agency.

To explain the conditions under which habitus or dispositions to learning may or may not change, the concept of 'horizons for action' (Bloomer, 1997, p.172) is introduced. Horizons for action distinguish between what lies within a person's existing habitus and what does not. Horizons are also restricted by external opportunity structures. As Bloomer (1997) explains:

> It is the combination of habitus and external opportunity structures which delineates the scope for action since it is perceptions of their appropriacy and availability, respectively, which affects opportunities for action. (Bloomer, 1997, p.143)

Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999) further argue that young people's career decisions are not straightforward and rational, but affected by a wide range of factors, so that decision-making is pragmatic, rather than rational. The model of pragmatically rational decision-making comes from the work of Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson (1996) and refers to the way that young people make decisions about their career. They find that young people do not follow rational, carefully structured decision-making procedures, but that their decisions are arrived at through processes that are only partly rational and often ill-informed, subject to chance and to change and affected by critical turning points, when a person's career undergoes a transformation.

To understand how young people construct their learning careers, Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999) use the concept of studentship, originally developed by Bloomer (1997):

> Studentship refers to the processes by which students construct personal learning careers through their active engagement with learning opportunities available to them within the constraints of social, cultural and other circumstances. It implies role making rather than role taking, knowledge making rather than knowledge taking and curriculum making rather than curriculum taking. (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997, p.7)

For Bloomer (1997, p.177), studentship is the 'most visible expression of human agency' by students in the process of learning, which involves them 'acting upon' learning opportunities. It includes the ways in which students respond to learning tasks, for example, by accepting, rejecting, or modifying what is required of them. It also involves the ways in which they adapt to course knowledge and to expectations of their relationships with teachers and other students.

Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000), who draw on the above work, describe young people's lives as stories of chance, involving serendipity and turning points. They find a mixture of planning and adhocery, and evidence of pragmatic rationality. Young people's decision-making is part of their interaction with stakeholders, but it is also part of a wider choice of lifestyle. Thus they argue that social trajectories and learning careers are constituted as much by chance and risk as by rational deliberation and effort, and that luck, tenacity and talent are important. But they argue that success 'also depends on who you are and who you know - differently distributed forms of capital.' (ibid, p.34)

Where Bloomer and Hodkinson emphasise the role of cultural capital, other researchers draw on the concept of social capital as an important means of understanding young people's experience. Social capital refers

to the features of social life, the networks, norms and trust that enable people to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives (Putnam, 2001). Schuller and Burns (1999) define social capital as a function of relationships, which may be between individuals or institutions. Raffo and Hall (2000) explain that social capital is not so much a property of an individual, but rather 'a property of the individual's set of relationships with others.' (ibid, p.9, citing Portes, 1995). Thus networks of relationships are an important feature of social capital (Moore, 1990b). Networks supply information and contacts, and Moore and Roberts (1990) have found that access to employment opportunities may depend more on having the right contacts, than having the right credentials. They find that many firms use informal recruitment, which is not only cheaper, but enables firms 'to exclude the 'unacceptable' and recruit non-troublesome labour' (Roberts, 1990, p.113).

Raffo and Hall differentiate between 'strong ties', and 'weak ties' (2000, p.19) in social networks. Strong ties are within an individual's immediate network of family, friends and community. Weak ties are at a distance from an individual's local network. They can provide new information and practical knowledge, not available within the existing social networks available to an individual, but such ties must be trustworthy.

Ball, Macrae and Maguire (1999) refer to different forms of ties as 'hot'

and 'cold' knowledge (ibid, p.215). 'Hot knowledge' is first or second hand knowledge, which is experiential and personal. It is often 'absolutely decisive in making a choice' (ibid, p.215). Families and friends are an important source of such knowledge. 'Cold knowledge' on the other hand, comprises formal and official sources of information, provided by college brochures and the careers service for example. For young people entering initial PCET, Ball, Macrae and Maguire find that cold knowledge 'does not tell the young people what they want to know and it lacks credibility' (ibid, p.215). In their study, such sources of information were regarded with suspicion, or were seen as uninformative, and the careers service 'hardly merits a single positive mention.' (ibid, p.215)

Transition behaviour and orientations to learning

A number of typologies of behaviour have been used by researchers to understand the different ways in which young people adapt and respond to their experience, and exert their individual agency as they make the transition to adulthood (see for example Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997, 1999; Brown, 1988; Macdonald, 1993). The typologies have their origins in the work of Merton (1968) and Woods (1979, 1983) (both cited in Haralambos and Holborn, 1995). Merton identifies five forms of adaptation: conformity, innovation, ritualism,

retreatism and rebellion. Woods adapts Merton's work to the context of pupils' ways of dealing with school life. He suggests that school pupils' behaviour depends on whether they accept or reject the aim of academic success, and whether they demonstrate the forms of behaviour which are required of them within school. Woods' typology includes eight responses: ingratiation, compliance (often in the form of instrumental compliance), opportunism, ritualism, retreatism, colonization, intransigence and rebellion.

Early studies such as that by Willis (1977) focused on the resistance displayed by young people to the structures of social reproduction. However, more recent research has found less evidence of the rebellion uncovered by Willis in his study of working-class lads. In the 1980s, Corr, Jamieson and Tomes (1989) did not encounter the same level of rejection of academic work as that described by Willis (1977), and they question whether Willis's 'lads' would have been able to celebrate the manual work of the building site and reject white collar work in the same way, if there had been no manual work available.

Furlong (1992) similarly takes issue with Willis's work. He argues that:

> Young people from lower working-class families do not actively seek unskilled work as part of their rejection of the middle-class values embodied in the school or as a celebration of working-class culture. (ibid, p.153)

Rather that:

> new entrants to the world of work often experience considerable frustration as they are forced to make downward adjustments to their occupational aspirations in the light of available opportunities. (ibid, p.13)

Studies of transition in the 1980s find that young people increasingly display different forms of compliance to the expectations placed upon them (Bates and Riseborough, 1993a; Gleeson, 1990). These studies draw attention to how young people negotiate their way between the policy expectation that they should continue with education and training, and their own perception of whether it is worth the effort.

There is also evidence that work no longer has the same significance in young people's lives. Whereas in the 1980s, Brown (1988) described occupational identity as a central part of social identity, and integral to individual dignity, in the 1990s, Ainley and Bailey (1997), Ball et al (2000) and Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999) suggest that the economic transition from school into the labour market may not be the primary concern of young people. Music, fashion and leisure may be more important in how they think about themselves. Ainley and Bailey (1997) suggest that:

> As employment – particularly the prospect of one occupation for the whole of a working life – becomes increasingly less relevant for defining social identities so consumer and leisure

identities become more important. (Ainley and Bailey, 1997, p.97)

A model for exploring young people's experience in Midlands College

The role of social and cultural capital in young people's transitions, suggest that the dominance of human capital theory in current education and training policy is highly problematic, because, as Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) suggest:

> It seems to fail to recognize the complex interactional, intellectual and situated processes that constitute learning; it is socially disembedded. (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000, p.9)

In their view, learning is about social biographies and identities rather than human capital. Bloomer (1997) similarly argues that current policy claims regarding the flexibility and transferability of skills as the key to economic competitiveness, take no account of the situated nature of knowledge, which he sees as fundamentally important in accounting for learning.

Although the link between education, training and employment appears to dominate government policy, young people may be reluctant conscripts to post-compulsory education. Education may be a way of sheltering from the labour market, due to the decline in other

opportunities at the end of compulsory schooling (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). Ainley and Bailey (1997, p.96) believe that studying in FE for some of the students in their study represents 'a moratorium on any sense of direction or incremental progression.' They describe many students as moving from one scheme or course to another, interspersing periods of education and training with casual work, and travel, especially to visit relatives abroad.

Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999), in their study of transition to FE, find that young people do not enter FE with a clear, fixed vision of their future. Instead 'many young people enter FE in order to find out who they are, what they can do and what they want to do.' (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999, p.74) They find that FE is an important time and place of change, including changes in disposition to learning. College lecturers are faced with having to encourage students to balance their lives outside college – leisure and work - with their study, and there are different ways in which this is handled, depending on college, course of study and age of students.

The interplay of the relationship between students, teachers and the institutional culture, which creates a hidden or informal curriculum, or what Arnot and colleagues (2001) call the social conditions of learning, plays an important part in constructing teaching and learning cultures in

practice (Evans and Davies, 1988). Raffo and Hall (2000) draw attention to how the formation of relationships with others in a given environment plays an important role in enabling people to fit in. They find that the culture of a new environment needs to match a young person's evolving sense of what they want to be or do in the future, and that orientations to learning can change if young people are able to form constructive relationships. Such relationships are part of the overall culture and ethos of institutions and are reflected in the hidden rather than the overt curriculum (Hickox, 1995).

Hodkinson, Colley and Scaife (2002), in their work on transforming learning cultures in FE, identify the following factors as significant in accounting for cultures of teaching and learning:

- formal factors related to a particular qualification: its curriculum, pedagogy and forms of assessment, and its positioning in relation to other qualifications
- teachers' professional identities, their career dispositions, and their perceptions of teaching and learning
- the teaching and learning cultures of particular sites of learning, such as classrooms
- the institutional culture, ethos and niche, and the history of the institution.

The present study examines the interrelationship of these factors in the context of GNVQ. In order to explore how lecturers and students

negotiated this territory and engaged in constructing a meaning for GNVQs in the case study college, I use Macrae, Maguire and Ball's (Macrae et al, 1997) typology of learning society participation.

Their model is intended to show the different positions young people may occupy in relation to notions of a learning society. Macrae et al suggest that the model be used to indicate the problems surrounding discourses of participation in a learning society, rather than as a means of labelling young people. However, there is a danger that their typology could promote 'preferred' forms of participation, and support the view that young people should move from the periphery to the core of the model, in order to be accepted and acceptable in a society apparently committed to learning and high skills. Whilst the typology is useful in helping to conceptualise young people's orientations to learning, it needs therefore to be treated with caution.

The model distinguishes between a number of forms of participation (figure 1).

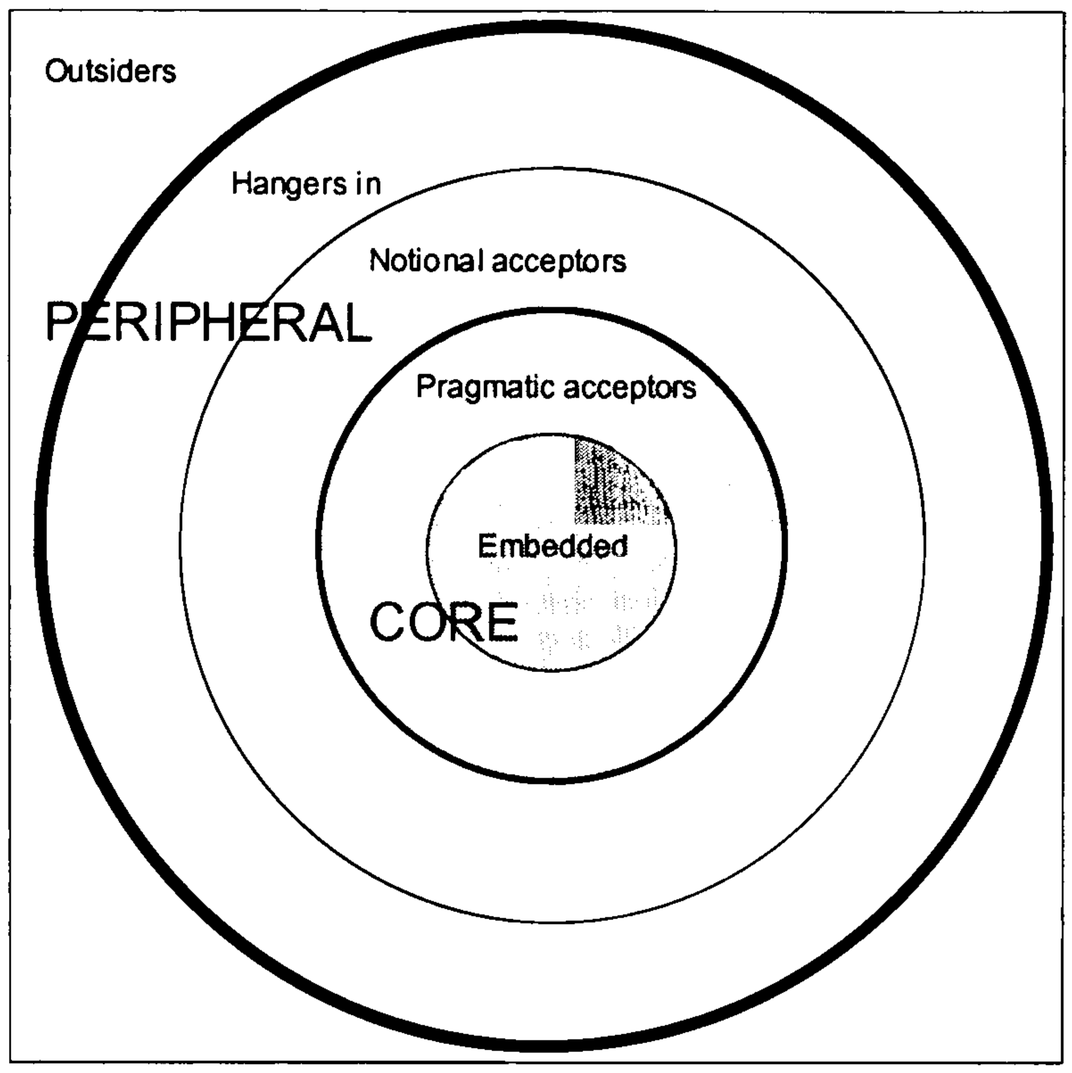

Figure 1: Orientations to learning and participation in learning society (Macrae, Maguire and Ball, 1997, p.502)

'Outsiders' include those who have opted out of formal education and training. 'Hangers-in' are generally low achievers, who have a tenuous hold on participation in learning. 'Acceptors' fall into two categories: 'notional acceptors' who accept the need for further education and training, but behave as though it will happen by a process of osmosis, and 'pragmatic acceptors', who see the need for study beyond the age of sixteen to increase their chances of a good job, and are therefore driven by the desire for further credentials. 'Embedded' learners, in contrast, are students for whom education matches their career aspirations and long-term life plan. Macrae et al describe such student as: ' 'becoming somebody' in the sense of being able to fulfil ambitions and relate their current life and work to an anticipated future.' (ibid, p.507) There is an underlying implication that becoming an 'embedded' learner is a goal to be aspired to. However, this definition of an 'embedded' learner might

equally apply to a young person who has accepted the limitations of their 'horizons for action' (Bloomer, 1997), based on implicit or explicit understandings of their position in the wider social structure, as much as to young people who have the confidence to actively expand their horizons.

Whilst acknowledging the possible limitations of the model, using Macrae et al's typology in relation to the students in Midlands College helps to illuminate students' orientation to learning, and provides a useful way of understanding how lecturers in the study perceived students' needs and motivation, and how they organised teaching and learning to match those perceptions.

While Macrae et al are keen to stress that young people can move in and out of categories over time, the model also offers a picture of how the positioning of different levels of GNVQ within the wider post-16 qualifications system may implicitly suggest particular orientations to learning amongst students at different levels (see figure 2). Young people who fail to achieve level 2 qualifications at the age of 16 may automatically be perceived as hangers-in or notional acceptors. However, the fieldwork data (see chapter seven) suggest that orientations to learning are much less neatly structured than this.

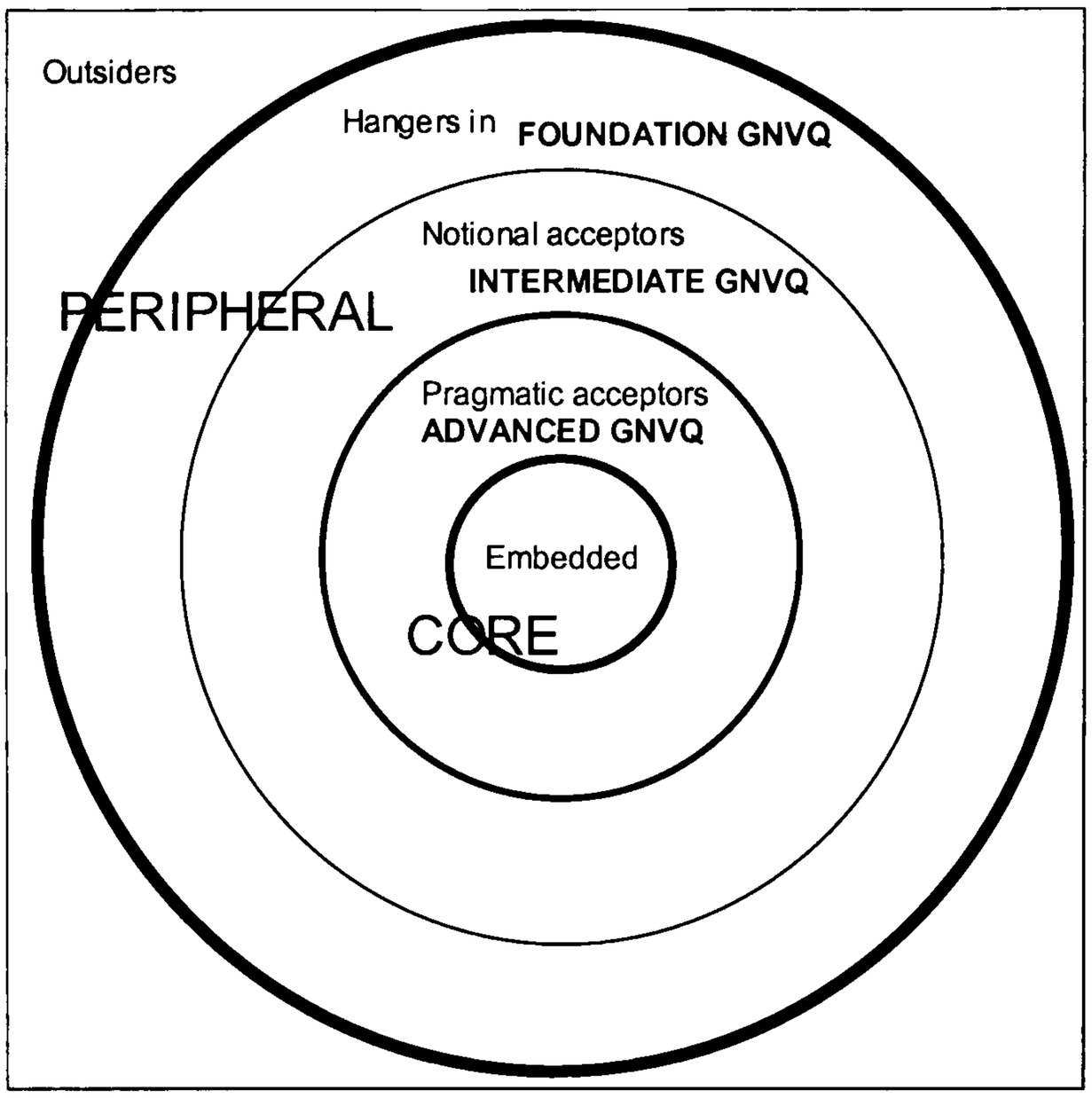

Figure 2: Positioning of GNVQ levels in relation to likely orientation to learning and participation in learning society

These differences may also be linked to differences in anticipated labour market participation (figure 3). The model therefore helps to explore how both the students and the qualification are positioned in the context of a learning and information society.

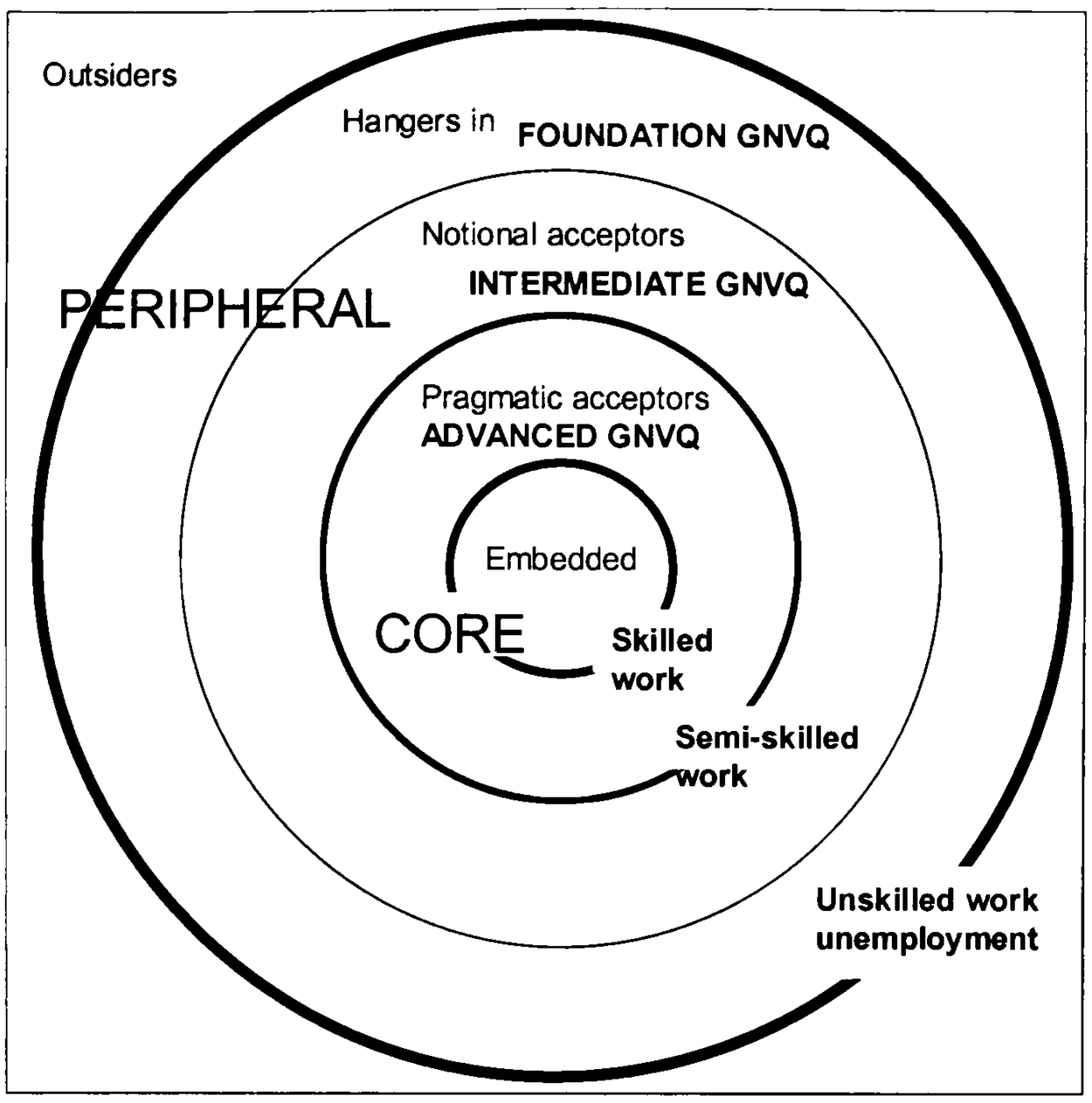

Figure 3: Anticipated labour market participation in relation to orientations to learning and participation in learning society

The individualisation of young people's transitions has resulted in a trend towards research which follows individual learning careers (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997, 1999; Raffo and Hall, 2000). Although this study of Midlands College draws on the theoretical concepts used in these studies, it is also concerned with the construction of teaching and learning cultures in GNVQs in the context of a further education college. The perceptions of students and lecturers are therefore reported under a number of themes, rather than in the form of individual life histories.

Exploring structure and agency

The underlying issue on which previous studies, and this study, aim to

shed light, is the interplay between structure and agency, often associated with the work of Giddens (1991). Structure refers to the institutional and societal structures which shape individual lives. Agency refers to the ways in which individuals can influence their life experience through their own action, or agency. For Giddens, the inter-relationship between structure and agency plays a significant role in defining people's lifeworlds.

The themes of structure and agency form a common thread in the research discussed in this chapter. Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) say of their work:

> We want to recognise both the individual construction of social identities and the different structural possibilities and conditions for such construction. (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000, p.24)

Evans, Behrens and Kaluza (2000) conclude in their study that career patterns emerge as a combination of structure and agency, produced by the interplay of trajectory and career behaviour, and state that:

> Career outcomes depend not only on the transition behaviour of young people but also on the institutional and labour market settings and social support available. (ibid, p.127)

There are competing views about how far people are coerced or constrained, or can determine their own actions (Clarke and Newman,

1997). Reproductive accounts suggest that schools and further education simply help to reproduce the social structure in which they are set, whereas resistance theory suggests that people can resist the structures imposed on them (McFadden, 1995). Recent research has developed the view that what happens in practice is often 'outside of the confines of the dominance/resistance binary' (Ball, 1994, p.11). The action or agency of people who are the object of policy-making and who put policy into practice, affect what policy becomes. Individuals may shape, resist and corrupt changes, so that policy is an area of potential intervention and change (Clarke and Newman, 1997), and allows researchers to move from a critique of the system and social conditions, to developing directions for practice where human agency has an effect (McFadden, 1995).

Nevertheless, Clarke and Newman also point to the ways in which dominant discourses play a powerful role in defining the boundaries of action. Here they draw on the work of Foucault (1980), who states that:

> Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is, the type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1980, p.131, cited in Gore, 1992, p.63)

Whilst acknowledging the power of such discourses, researchers into

youth transitions find young people's orientations to learning and their futures a source of hope. Coles (1988b, p.20) describes youth as 'ever-optimistic', 'even when 'modest ambitions' turn into shattered dreams', and states that the 'resilience of youth' gives some optimism for the future. In the 16-19 Initiative study, Roberts (1993, p.229) found much evidence of young people 'striving despite numerous obstacles to create paths for themselves towards their own goals.' In their study, Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) find that:

> Young people constantly reiterate that they do have choices, that luck, hard work and sheer determination are the bases of 'success'. (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000, p.4)

It is the way such hopes are played out through studying GNVQ, which forms the focus of this thesis.

Summary

This chapter has discussed how understandings of young people's transitions at the end of compulsory schooling have changed and developed, as the context for transition has become characterised by risk and uncertainty. The use of theories of social and cultural capital to make sense of young people's experience discussed in the chapter is in contrast to the predominance of human capital theory in policy-making for initial PCET. The concept of learning careers and ideas concerning the social

conditions of learning offer a means of exploring such issues in greater depth.

The ideas considered in the chapter suggest that the transitions experienced by young people in the case study college may be more individualised and perceived as more risky and uncertain than in the past. Learning in initial PCET may also not conform to the rational models underpinning government policy, and may be susceptible to pragmatic decision-making, as well as chance and serendipity on the part of students and their teachers. The concept of learning careers proposes that a number of factors may affect students' orientations to learning, and that social and cultural capital are at least as important as human capital to understanding the meaning and purpose of different forms of transition. These issues form the basis for the exploration of students' and lecturers' perspectives in chapters six and seven.

Chapter 4

Changing teaching and learning cultures in the new FE: the impact of markets and managerialism and the place of GNVQ

Introduction

The fieldwork for this study was undertaken in the 1990s, following incorporation of the FE sector. Investigating young people's experience of studying GNVQ in a further education college at this time, involved entering a context of change and uncertainty. In April 1993, as a result of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, colleges became part of a separate further education sector, free of local education authority control, and each college became an independent, self-governing corporation. As Gleeson (2001) has suggested, at one level, incorporation introduced greater autonomy to colleges, but it also made colleges open to greater central control via market and managerial forces, as a policy of 'more for less' came to dominate the sector (DTI, 1995). Incorporation brought with it constant reorganisation and restructuring of FE colleges. In the run-up to independence, colleges amalgamated to ensure viability; subsequently, internal restructuring has become a regular feature of college life. The national 'Silver Book' agreement, which had set rates of

pay and conditions of service for lecturers across the country, has been scrapped, and colleges are now responsible for agreeing lecturers' contracts independently.

The effect on the teaching workforce in FE has been considerable. Increasing numbers of lecturing staff are on part-time, hourly and short-term contracts. At the time of this study, 43,400 lecturers were employed full-time in colleges, compared with 71,900 part-time. A further 21,200 staff, split almost equally between full-time and part-time, were employed on lower paid contracts, in support roles for teaching and learning (FEFC, 1999). College lecturers with permanent contracts have faced a considerable intensification of their workload, whilst others have experienced an ever greater sense of risk and uncertainty about their job security.

Lecturers' professional practice and their perceptions of GNVQs cannot be divorced from this context. Indeed, for many lecturing staff in the case study college, the introduction of GNVQs epitomised the wider changes taking place in FE. This chapter explores the changing nature of the further education context, and its impact on the case study college. The first part of the chapter examines changing teaching and learning cultures in FE. The second part introduces the case study college and considers cultures of teaching and learning within the college, particularly in

relation to the introduction and implementation of GNVQs.

Markets and managerialism in further education

Although FE colleges were being driven towards a more market-oriented system in the 1980s (Avis, 1988; Broomhead and Coles, 1988), the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act is associated with a concerted move to introduce market principles and managerialism into FE (Gleeson, 1993, 1996a). Conservative government policy of the 1990s centred around the notion that educational institutions should survive in a competitive marketplace. They were expected to compete with one another to attract students onto post-16 courses. The 1991 White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES, ED, WO, 1991) announced that schools and colleges would be required to publish results, so that they could be compared, which was supposed to enable young people, parents and employers to make informed judgements, based on a comparison of results. An 'independent' careers service was seen as crucial in order to provide neutral guidance and advice, so that young people would make appropriate choices at 16, and by 1996 almost all careers services were contracted out to independent providers.

The introduction of GNVQs is closely associated with these reforms. GNVQs and incorporation of the FE sector were proposed in the same

White Paper (DES, ED, WO, 1991). In the academic year that GNVQs were launched nationally (1993-1994), colleges became independent. The new qualification provided an ideal opportunity to increase student numbers. The 1991 White Paper stated that GNVQs should 'be suitable for use by full-time students in colleges, and, if appropriate in schools' (DES, ED, WO, 1991, p.19), and this statement encouraged the widespread introduction of GNVQs in schools as well as colleges. Wolf (FEDA et al, 1997) suggests that the phrase came almost as an afterthought. However, taken in the context of the 1991 White Paper as a whole, it could be interpreted as a quite deliberate measure to place schools and colleges in direct competition with one another for students (Spours, 1997).

Students and their parents were redefined as consumers, who were encouraged to see themselves as purchasers of learning in an educational marketplace. Training credits, which were introduced for young people entering training schemes from 1993 to 'buy' their training place, were originally to be extended to include educational courses, though these plans were not implemented. The 1994 Competitiveness White Paper (DTI, 1995), which proposed the introduction of learning credits, explained that:

> Learning credits would provide young people with the means to purchase education and training courses direct from providers. They would help to motivate young people to

> acquire marketable skills and qualifications. They would encourage education and training providers to be more responsive. (DTI, 1995, p.90)

A major goal in creating a competitive marketplace in education was to keep public spending down. This goal was coupled with a strong rhetoric of maintaining 'standards', a term which has been the subject of multiple definitions (Ecclestone, 2002). Thus the 1995 Competitiveness White Paper (DTI, 1995) stated that:

> We must ensure that both general and vocational qualifications are delivered cost effectively and take steps to reduce wastage without compromising standards. (DTI, 1995, p.89)

Funding mechanisms were adjusted to encourage colleges to increase their recruitment, whilst ensuring retention and achievement of students (DTI, 1994).

The 'marketisation' of FE (Gleeson, 1996, p.85) has been coupled with an increasing emphasis on the need for strong management systems, deemed necessary to achieve efficiency, control and accountability, and to monitor performance (Randle and Brady, 1997). In a detailed analysis of managerialism in the public sector, Clarke and Newman (1997) trace how the Conservative Government's claim that the public sector needed to become more business-like led, in the first instance, to the introduction of measures of good financial housekeeping. These were based on ideas of

value for money, economy, efficiency and effectiveness, as well as learning from business the notions of 'core business', 'ownership' and 'audit' (ibid, p.78). These ideas were then overlain with apparently progressive images of change, which would transform what were claimed to be 'unresponsive, paternalistic and leaden bureaucracies' into the 'customer-driven, flexible, quality oriented and responsive organisations of the future.' (ibid, p.38) Clarke and Newman argue that managerialism was therefore 'not just a process of organisational restructuring, but a large scale process of *cultural* change through which 'hearts and minds' could be engaged.' (ibid, p.36)

The impact of markets and managerialism on teaching and learning cultures

A number of researchers point to how the post-incorporation further education sector has been dominated by the discourses of markets and managerialism (Avis, 1999; Elliott, 1996; Gleeson, 2001a; Shain and Gleeson, 1999). Target-setting, monitoring and quality assurance form key priorities. These discourses are seen as redefining lecturers' work in a number of ways. The lecturer's role now is to meet corporate goals, manage a range of students, document achievement for accountability purposes, and work efficiently and effectively in meeting standardised criteria for learning outcomes (Sachs, 2001).

Designing curriculum content is carried out centrally by curriculum experts. The task of the lecturer is to ensure that the prescribed content is delivered to students, making outcomes-based qualifications such as GNVQs, with their detailed specifications, ideally suited to the new regime. A number of researchers suggest that teachers have thus been cast in the role of technicians, ' 'delivering' a curriculum designed elsewhere' (Yeomans, 1998, p.139; see also Avis, 1996; Gleeson and Hodkinson, 1995). Yeomans (1998) notes how the highly-specified GNVQ curriculum model has developed a degree of dependency amongst teachers, who wait for those in authority to hand down curricular specifications. His research finds that teachers feel they have little control over GNVQs, or any understanding of the processes by which they were produced. Where control of the curriculum has been removed to the centre, control of learning is in the hands of students, who are expected to take responsibility for their own learning, guided and supported by lecturers who take on a facilitating role (Avis, 1999).

The need for accountability replaces professionality (Ball, 1993) and takes precedence over all aspects of work, involving extensive form-filling, record-keeping and monitoring. For example, at the time of this study, one of the GNVQ awarding bodies, BTEC (now Edexel), provided 15 documents that the teacher/assessor should complete (BTEC, 1993). Eleven were for each individual student, of which three needed to be

completed once: an initial assessment; an induction plan, and an exit review. A further eight needed to be completed at regular intervals: an assessment activity front sheet, an assessment activity action plan, a progress review, an index to the portfolio of evidence, a vocational unit tracking sheet, a key skills unit tracking sheet, a grading activity record, and a qualification summary. Finally, four were for a whole teaching group, consisting of a learning and assessment plan, a forward plan for learning delivery and assessment, a record of assessment sampling, and a group record of achievement. Requirements such as these create a huge increase in bureaucracy and administrative load (Helsby, 1999).

Yet lecturers are supposed to work smarter, not harder, based on a logic of economic rationalism, whereby greater productivity is achieved through increased use of technology, improved planning, organisation and skill utilisation (Ball, 1999b; Easthope and Easthope, 2000). The ideal lecturer in this context demonstrates flexibility, reliability and competence (Shain and Gleeson, 1999) and is a 'self-managing, reflective practitioner' (Ainley, 2000, p.2). In reality, many teachers experience changes in the nature of their work as a process of chronic intensification and loss of control (Hargreaves, 1994; Helsby, 1999). Pressure to meet targets brings with it fear of failure, and leads teachers and institutions to retreat to security and predictability, and to focus on technical proficiency (Fielding, 1999).

Changing lecturers' professional orientations

Research into the changing nature of teacher professionalism suggests that traditional notions of the professional as autonomous expert have been replaced by competing discourses trying to shape the professional identity of teachers (Ball, 1999b; Sachs, 2001; Shain and Gleeson, 1999). The dominant discourse is one of entrepreneurial, managerial professionalism (Sachs, 2001). Managerial professionalism encourages the development of what Sachs terms designer teachers, 'who demonstrate compliance to policy imperatives and perform at high levels of efficiency and effectiveness' (ibid, p.156). They are what Ball (1999b) calls colonised teachers, who are 'primarily oriented to performance indicators, competition and comparison and responsiveness' (ibid, p.9). Managerial professionalism contrasts with an alternative democratic professionalism, which seeks to demystify professional work and build alliances between teachers, students, and members of the community (Sachs, 2001). Ball describes teachers who work in this way as authentic, showing moral purpose, emotional investment, and political awareness.

Although there is agreement that managerial cultures dominate, and push teachers in the direction of compliance (Gleeson and Shain, 1999; Shain and Gleeson, 1999), colonization (Ball, 1999b) and deprofessionalisation (Randle and Brady, 1997), the extent of this is a

matter for debate. Where Randle and Brady believe that teachers have been deprofessionalised, Easthope and Easthope (2000) have found that teachers in a study based in Tasmania were able to hold on to their professional identity, but only for a limited period of time.

A sense of professional responsibility towards students and concern for students' educational needs, is contrasted with an emphasis on business values and efficiency associated with management (Elliott, 1996; Fielding, 1999; Halliday, 1990). However, Easthope and Easthope (2000) found in their Tasmanian study that, as intensification becomes greater, care for the students is one of the first things that overworked teachers shed. They believe this has a considerable impact on teaching and learning cultures as a whole:

> The hidden and long-term effects on the climate of a college when teachers are too pressured to carry out many of the caring activities they perceive as part of their professional identity can have significant effects on the attitudes, self-esteem and motivation of both staff and students. (Easthope and Easthope, 2000, p.54)

The ways in which cultures of markets and managerialism affect teaching and learning in FE is not straightforward and all of a piece. The small amount of recent empirical research into the experience of lecturers in FE in England (Ainley and Bailey, 1997; Bathmaker, Parsons and Avis, 1999; Elliott, 1996; Robson, 1998; Shain and Gleeson, 1999) suggests that while

some lecturers may willingly comply and appear to be colonised by managerialism, many others seek to hold on to a notion of professionalism, which is rooted in a commitment to students.

Furthermore, although Ranson et al (1997) draw attention to the significance of institutions in the process of structuring learning and defining the boundaries of what is acceptable practice, it is rare for a college to have one shared culture (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000). With the exception of sixth form colleges, FE colleges have been described as heterogeneous in previous studies (Ainley and Bailey, 1997; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997), with little sense of community life across the college.

In the second part of this chapter, the discussion of Midlands College needs to be understood in this context. The picture of the college presented in the following section relates to GNVQ provision in four departments in the college, and there may be other teaching and learning cultures elsewhere in the college. In this section, I draw on data from fieldwork interviews with two senior managers in the college – an assistant principal, Kath, and the quality manager, Bill – as well as with a number of lecturing staff, to provide a contextualisation for the later fieldwork chapters (chapters six and seven). A detailed account of methods and methodology can be found in the next chapter (chapter five).

Teaching and learning cultures in Midlands College

Midlands College is situated in a large city in the Midlands. During the recession which followed the international oil crisis in 1973, the city, which has traditionally been dependent on manufacturing, suffered a much greater decline than the UK economy as a whole. Between 1971 and 1993, total employment fell by 29 per cent, with a fall in manufacturing of 66 per cent. In 1981, manufacturing was still the biggest source of employment, employing 44 per cent of the workforce. However, by 1995, manufacturing accounted for only 24 per cent of the workforce, with a range of services providing the main sources of employment. Where the fall in manufacturing jobs was matched by an increase in service sector jobs across the UK, there was only a five per cent increase in service jobs during this period in the city (Midlands City Economic Information Centre, 1999).

There are eight FE colleges and three sixth form colleges in the city, with more colleges within travelling distance outside the city boundary, and most schools have sixth forms. During 1997/1998 (the year in which the fieldwork was undertaken), 73% of 16 year olds and 62% of 17 year olds continued with education at school or college (on full-time or part-time further education courses) in the Midlands as a whole. In the city itself, the proportion of young people staying on in education after the age of 16

was below the national average at just under 67 per cent. The educational achievements of many students who continued with education and training post-16 were modest. The percentage of 16-year-olds gaining five or more GCSEs at grades A to C was just over 32 per cent in 1996 (the year when many of the students in this study would have ended compulsory schooling), compared with a Midlands average of just over 40 per cent (FEFC, 1998).

The part of the city where the college is located, is socially, economically and culturally diverse. There are substantial minority ethnic communities in the area, mainly of Pakistani and North Indian origin; in addition, there are African-Caribbean, Yemeni and Irish communities. The inner-city wards, from which the college recruits many of its students, experience major social deprivation, and have an unemployment rate of over 34%. Much employment in the immediate area is small scale, including textiles, jewellery making, retailing, wholesaling and the restaurant trade. The majority of the students come from the local area.

The college is a large general further education college, which developed out of a technical college tradition. Kath, one of the assistant principals in the college, described how the college had been a general, craft-based college with three huge departments, consisting of construction,

engineering, and general education. It was very male-dominated, both in terms of students and staff, and she was one of only nine women lecturers, out of a total of approximately 160 lecturing staff, when she started working there 12 years previously. Now the college has a number of sites, including a former sixth form college, and is divided into 16 teaching departments. The largest areas of provision are in humanities, business, and health and community care, which make up the majority (65 per cent) of provision. Engineering, construction and science account for 23 per cent of provision. The curriculum covers a wide range of vocational and non-vocational courses, ranging from entry level to postgraduate level, though 64 per cent of students follow courses which are at level one, or foundation level, in the national qualifications framework (FEFC, 1998).

In the year in which the fieldwork took place, the college employed 510 full-time equivalent staff. There were slightly more female lecturers than male, according to the assistant principal. Unlike many colleges, the majority of staff was on permanent contracts, as shown in table 1.

	Type of employment contract			
Job role	**Permanent**	**Fixed term**	**Casual**	**Total**
Lecturers	233	7	33	273
Learning support assistants	103	1	5	109
Technicians	119	4	5	128
Total	455	12	43	510

Table 1: Midlands College staff expressed as full-time equivalent in 1997-1998 (source: college data)

Over 20,000 students were enrolled at the college at this time, with equal numbers of female and male students, and a considerable number from a minority ethnic background, reflecting the make-up of the local community. 16 to 18 year olds made up 14 per cent of total enrolments. Amongst these young people, 73 were full-time students on A-level programmes compared with 192 students taking GNVQs, of whom 72 were following Advanced level programmes. Although the college did not run full-time GCSE retake programmes, a large number of 16-18 year olds were entered for English and Maths GCSE (see table 2).

Programme	**no of students**
2 or more A-levels	73
Advanced GNVQs	72
Intermediate GNVQs	74
Foundation GNVQs	46
Total GNVQs	192
GCSE English	156
GCSE maths	177

Table 2: Students aged 16-18 taking A-level, GNVQ, and GCSE English and Maths at Midlands College (Source: college data, 1996)

Teaching and learning in GNVQs at Midlands College: management perspectives

At the time of the study Midlands College was unusual in so far as the effects of incorporation were not as negative as in other colleges. This was partly because under local authority control, the college had received a low resource allocation compared to many other colleges in the area, and had received no additional funding for students with particular learning needs, so that incorporation had brought an improvement in funding to the college. This was perhaps why, as Kath and Bill (the quality manager), the two senior managers interviewed, explained:

Bill: We haven't had a redundancy here.

Kath: No, we've never had a redundancy.

Bill: The vast majority of other colleges have had some at least, if not lots. Or they've all been made redundant in order to rationalise and that sort of thing. That hasn't happened here.

Teaching contracts were generous compared to other colleges, and departments and lecturers within them were not under pressure to maximise retention of students at all costs. Kath and Bill saw the college as a caring college. Bill said: 'I probably spend far too much time talking to students', and Kath described her level of commitment to individual students as follows:

> I remember a student that I saw every day by special appointment to get right the way through to the end of a programme. And if I hadn't made that commitment, that youngster wouldn't have got through. And I think you can repeat me a hundred times. Every member of staff who's taught GNVQ somewhere along the line has a student or several students where they've crossed the line to that degree. Often it's to do with just so much happening in their lives and often very disruptive things. (Kath, Assistant Principal)

She saw her response as typical of how other staff would see their role. She also described the college as having a strong commitment to equal opportunities:

> I think the other unifying thing about the culture, I think there's a lot more than lip service paid to equal opportunities. I think there is quite a high level of understanding and committment to issues around equal opportunity. I think there is a genuine, and I really do think it is genuine, level of fairness to students in this college. (Kath, Assistant Principal)

This is not to suggest that the two senior managers saw the college as faultless. Kath explained:

> It's like all organisations, it's not perfect, it's quite flawed. I'm not suggesting we're wonderful, but I do think it's a college people commit to and often stay too long in. You know, our staff, loads of people love to join, but they don't want to go. (Kath, Assistant Principal)

Although incorporation did not appear to have had such damaging effects on conditions of service in Midlands College as elsewhere, considerable changes had taken place to the structure and organisation of teaching and learning, and GNVQs were seen as a catalyst for several of these developments.

GNVQs were introduced into the college in response to a combination of curriculum imperatives at national level, and funding pressures at institutional level. The proposed withdrawal of other qualifications (particularly BTEC First and BTEC National) precipitated the decision, as reported by one of the IT lecturers:

> We saw that BTEC First was dying if you like, and was being phased out, or that was the interpretation we were given from BTEC. (Tony, IT lecturer)

The decision was not necessarily popular. The college was and remained a 'BTEC college', and in my data there was slippage between the language of BTEC and GNVQ, as well as unfavourable comparison of GNVQs with BTEC and other qualifications, as Kath explained:

> I think it's probably true to say we'd have stuck with BTEC Nationals and BTEC Firsts as long as they were there. We

> also had some good City and Guilds qualifications that were very popular, and I think a lot of people were very sorry to see them go, but it was very much a strategic decision to engage in GNVQ. (Kath, Assistant Principal)

GNVQs were seen as a useful vehicle by senior management to gain strategic control over curriculum development. From Kath's point of view:

> In quality terms what was so nice about GNVQs, was we've been able to control them in a way that we haven't been able to control other things. (Kath, Assistant Principal)

Kath saw GNVQ as a way of implementing changes to teaching and learning:

> I think GNVQs and NVQs have accelerated change and have forced people to stop and think about their teaching styles and so on. (Kath, Assistant Principal)

GNVQ development was not allowed to grow as an isolated initiative in different parts of the college. An extensive structure of co-ordination was introduced. The college had a cross-college GNVQ co-ordinator and a key skills co-ordinator. In each department there was a GNVQ co-ordinator, and where GNVQ provision was large there were separate co-ordinators for Intermediate and Advanced GNVQ. In addition, there were key skills co-ordinators in each department, with further staff identified as responsible within each department for the three key skills of communication, number and IT. Support for basic skills and open

learning was also co-ordinated within each department.

The quality assurance mechanisms associated with GNVQ and the need to develop key skills in all programmes, meant that alongside a high degree of co-ordination, the Assistant Principal believed that 'You're forced to have a team-based approach to the delivery of it'. She saw GNVQ as an opportunity to develop collaboration between teaching staff, and she deliberately encouraged departments new to GNVQ to draw on expertise in other vocational areas, though this was not without its drawbacks from a management point of view:

> One curriculum area which was Business Studies started, and then as soon as Care came on-stream, we joined in with that and so on and what happened was we were able to build on the expertise of the only people who knew anything about them. Which I think probably meant that the Business Studies staff had a bit more of a say maybe than was healthy. (Kath, Assistant Principal)

Nevertheless, collaboration was welcomed in Midlands College by the senior managers:

> What's been good about the GNVQs is that there are recognised knowledgeable people in the college, who are a resource to other people. And that happens both formally and informally. I think the informal networks are the best, once you've got them established. I think the days of somebody just looking blankly at a set of specifications for a new qualification they've never offered before and not knowing where to start are over really. (Kath, Assistant Principal)

The changes to teachers' workload brought about by GNVQs were acknowledged by Bill:

> It's about teaching as opposed to just imparting information. If teachers, lecturers, do throw themselves into it fully, it's a damn sight harder than walking in and delivering for a couple of hours every week and marking a few books as well. (Bill, quality manager)

However, Kath suggested that teachers' organisational skills could be to blame for the intensification of work and the excessive workload:

> I've seen GNVQ Advanced programmes where students are absolutely buried under the weight of work and where particularly if it's not been managed really well you've got different unit demands that will conflict. I've seen situations where students are tearing their hair out, because you know, they've maybe had nothing much to do for 6 weeks and then suddenly they've got 4 major assignments that have to all be in on the same day, and I keep thinking, well, that's somebody's fault, it's not the students. It's not negative on the students for not having planned it, but often they haven't had the brief until it's virtually June and there's too much bunching of assignments. (Kath, Assistant Principal)

The lecturers involved in teaching GNVQ offered a rather different view. The accounts presented in the next section of this chapter consider how they described the changes associated with GNVQ. These accounts act as a contextualisation for the lecturers' perspectives discussed in Chapter Six. Whereas the comments in this chapter confirm the intensification of work referred to in the literature earlier in the chapter, in Chapter Six, lecturers' orientations to students are identified as a key factor in defining

overall teaching and learning practice in GNVQs.

GNVQs at Midlands College: lecturers' perspectives

For lecturers in Midlands College, GNVQs brought extensive changes, and a considerably increased workload. The academic year had been restructured from three terms into two semesters as the outcome of a cross-college GNVQ working group (as reported by Tony, an IT lecturer) to create greater flexibility with timetabling. Enrolment took place in both September and January and the Advanced GNVQ was timetabled to be completed in 18 months, or three semesters, so that the final six months (one semester) could be used by successful students to complete additional units, and by other students to complete all their work (referred to as mopping up in the Business Studies department).

Despite the rationale for restructuring, the semester system was not welcomed whole-heartedly, but was seen as part of an intensification of work. The apparent advantages of the semester structure contrasted with what Alan (Business Studies) saw as a considerable reduction in time available for teaching:

> By the time you take out test weeks, you take out half terms, you take out weeks when they've got other things like careers and such like, you're down to about a 15 week teaching semester. And in 15 weeks, to actually present something that's really meaty, without just slipping across the surface of it, you're teaching nothing in depth, and what

> you're doing is you're setting tasks for them to find out rather than us showing them and teaching. (Alan, Business Studies)

Whereas prior to incorporation, there was an allocation of 21 hours for full-time courses, the introduction of GNVQ coincided with a reduction to 16 hours for full-time courses. Alan believed that the reduction made 'a mockery' of the notion of a full-time course:

> We have them for two and a half days a week and we call them a full-time student. (Alan, Business Studies)

He described how the reduction of hours affected his teaching:

> Next week I've got to teach cash flow forecasts to students in one week. Cash flow forecasts are something I used to take 3 or 4 weeks over and now I've got to do them in one week, and the thing is, if the students don't learn, tough, because you've got something else that's just round the corner. (Alan, Business Studies)

The rhetoric of self-directed, independent learning, which was supposed to be a feature of GNVQs, became bound up with the reduction in teaching hours, leading to negative reactions.

Furthermore, the senior management now reviewed hours each semester and made cuts where necessary. This left staff who had taught during the first semester with a large assessment burden in the following semester which was not reflected in their timetabled contact time, as Gail, the cross-college GNVQ co-ordinator, explained:

> That is the real problem. They might cut the hours but the assessment load ... They'll cut the teaching hours but you still have to do the same amount of work. (Gail, cross-college GNVQ co-ordinator)

The organisation of curriculum provision in departments was based on a combination of what was considered to be good educational practice and pragmatism linked to resources and viability. At the time of this study, Foundation level GNVQ was taught in a separate Foundation Studies department. It was perceived as providing for students who had little to build on from school, and these students were seen as needing lecturers who were able to work successfully with them on basic skills, rather than subject specialists. However, Foundation GNVQ moved back and forth between specialist subject departments and Foundation Studies, according to available resourcing, and both prior to and following this study, was taught in subject departments.

A similar juggling of educational values and pragmatic decision-making was evident in other departments, influencing the overall structure of programmes, the choice of optional units, and entry criteria for students. Mike (Business Studies) described how mandatory units were taught first, then optional, and finally additional units. He explained that the rationale for this was to develop students' independence and responsibility for their own learning over the duration of the programme:

> I think the core by and large needs to be taught, but you would obviously do a lesson which was made up of three of four different things. Whereas on advanced mandatory units I'd probably do as much as 70/30 my input to their input, get to an option, it moves much nearer 50/50. For an option I might do 4 or 5 weeks of lessons, like I do a European Studies option, so I might do 4 or 5 lessons and then say "look, I think you can profitably now start to do a bit yourself." Additionals, 20/80, you to them. So not only can you adjust the individual subjects or individual lessons, I think you can adjust your programme. So obviously you put the options and additionals in year 2 when the students have gained some of those skills that you require. (Mike, Business Studies curriculum leader)

However, Gail reported that in the same department, the model had to be amended for Leisure and Tourism GNVQ, and first and second year Advanced students taught together, because of viability related to student numbers. Here, first year students started their programme studying optional units alongside second year students, rather than taking the mandatory units first. In the face of financial constraints, educational concerns had to be overruled. In Science, insufficient applicants for Intermediate GNVQ, led the teaching team to accept some students onto Advanced GNVQ with lower GCSE grades than were originally specified for entry.

The progression routes made available by the three levels of GNVQ, and the obvious step from Advanced GNVQ to HND study, were exploited fully to retain students and increase numbers. Even if students had not successfully completed one level, they were encouraged to enrol for the next. Kath, the Assistant Principal, provided an educational rationale for

this practice:

> I think there's a lot to be said for actually starting the next level while you're finishing the last level so there's no break. Somehow there's something so motivational about launching onto the next stage with the pressure off about passing, if you know what I mean, that somehow you can dovetail the two in very easily for some people. (Kath, Assistant Principal)

However, lecturing staff were aware that students making slow progress with one level of GNVQ often struggled with the next. Furthermore, Mike, curriculum leader for Business Studies, felt that senior managers were far more concerned about retaining students, and about successful completion rates, than whether courses offered interesting and innovative experiences to the students. He contrasted current practice with the past:

> People came out with a business qualification and had a good knowledge of business but the totality of their experiences perhaps was greater than just studying a course. They were able to go on trips, undertake work experience regularly, the kind of things that it's quite difficult to do on the current course, because you can't jam it all in. Because if we say "oh, we're running trips and we're doing this and we're doing that", the senior management say "ah, but what are your achievement data? That's all I'm bloody interested in. Have you got 95% of your, of the finished article through? Oh no, it's only 88%. Well concentrate on that, not on taking them to the European Parliament", taking them to an industrial museum or whatever. No-one ever says that to you to your face, but you can see that's where their focus is. (Mike, Business Studies curriculum leader)

For lecturers, the collaboration supposedly generated by GNVQ focussed largely on meeting awarding body requirements, particularly the tracking and recording of performance criteria using standard documentation across the college. Although these were seen as a means of ensuring 'some kind of parity' across programmes by Steve, the college key skills co-ordinator, the task appeared to be enormous, and overshadowed attempts to actually teach or develop students' key skills. Steve was aware of the onerous nature of the tracking and recording requirements:

> The problem I think for many lecturers involved in the process is the sheer volume of recording to do with them all. You've got clear criteria, you know what a student is able to do, and whilst that might be very relevant and very important, the problem is when you come to actually try to record it all and try and assess it, grade it and the themes that underlie all of that, it becomes a very laborious process. (Steve, key skills co-ordinator)

While the post of co-ordinator involved large amounts of paperwork and administration, Gail, the cross-college GNVQ co-ordinator, saw her role as combining these tasks with a more genuinely collaborative role where she could offer support and advice, break down isolation, and reassure colleagues that 'yes you're not on your own. We're all having these problems.'

She described the development work with other staff as the most enjoyable part of the job, though this often had to be put aside in the face

of awarding body requirements such as external verifier (EV) visits:

AMB: Are there good things that you enjoy about your role?

Gail: Having the contact with people. I've been to a couple of meetings, Science is one, and they're saying we're going to do this. And when they're agreeing to do something then I come up with different questions, "well what about this, what about this?" Even if they go with the first thing that they said, I think it gives them things to talk through and consider different angles. And I think they find that useful at times. Or I can say, "Business do it this way, Art do it this way." But a lot of the contact I have tends to revolve at the moment around EV visits.

However, Gail felt that it was often a frustrating experience of one-way collaboration, both with teaching staff and senior management:

> Most of it's just frustration from one end to the other. It's one of these jobs that's got a lot of responsibility and no authority, so it is just frustrating all the time trying to improve things, and then having to rely on someone else to implement them. They agree to do it, and then you find out six months down the line there's a problem, and you find out in the end they're not doing it. (Gail, cross-college GNVQ co-ordinator)

Similarly with senior management she found:

> Sometimes things aren't acted upon even though you've got the contact. Then it seems that I'm passing on information, they're saying "yes something needs to be done", but nothing happens. (Gail, cross-college GNVQ co-ordinator)

For all lecturing staff, the pressure associated with managing GNVQ coursework assessment was a major concern. In all vocational areas, lecturers commented on how the open-ended assessment system in

GNVQ was difficult to manage and increased their workload. The understanding that students could submit work at any time during their registration period with the awarding body (five years), and the limitless opportunities for students to resubmit work, put considerable pressures on staff time and resources. The assessment system, which identified students as 'not yet complete' rather than as failed, and the availability of lecturers at all times to help students, contributed to an intensification of work.

Lecturers across different areas in the study (Afsar, IT; Gail, Business; Alan, Business; Kate, Foundation Studies) explained how the notion of students managing their own assessment seemed to take on a life of its own. Many students, particularly weaker students, did not submit work on the agreed date. Work might be submitted months later, or even the following year. Work which needed to be revised might not be resubmitted, or might be worse when it was, and it was difficult to track the changes which students had made to their work. In addition, a year after an assignment had been set, the member of staff involved was not necessarily teaching on the programme any longer.

Marking assignments, assessing practical activities such as presentations, and giving feedback, were very time-consuming. The greatest additional burden came from assessing work from previous units which was well

'past its sell by date'. As Alan (Business) explained:

> I've got students coming to me now and they're asking me to assess them from a course that they did last year. Now that makes it even more of a problem, for the simple reason you're chasing what other people have actually set, other work. So you have to read the assignments that were set. And so you seem to be in a quagmire because there's all this assessment taking place. Where the hell do you do the teaching? (Alan, Business)

Because a number of lecturers had other management and administrative responsibilities, the burden of GNVQ assessment and paperwork fell on a smaller number of people:

> We've got a number of people now, their admin time is taken up doing other things. Consequently, the workload for assessment and making sure everything goes OK on courses is distributed amongst a smaller number of people. (Gail, cross-college GNVQ co-ordinator)

The quality assurance requirements of the assessment system generated further pressures. This was connected not only with completing paperwork, but with ensuring the authenticity of students' work. Gail described how the Business Studies department held one-to-one assessment tutorials to check the authenticity of work and to confirm students' understanding:

> At the end of the semester, they'll hand in work for a deadline for us, and we'll look at it, but we still have to sit down with every single student and go through their assignments. You can't just mark it and give it back, because of this validity and authenticity. If they produce work quite a long way afterwards, then they would have to

> go through it in a lot more detail, and if they couldn't explain an aspect, we'd either tell them to go and learn it, or we'd give them some other tasks. (Gail, cross-college GNVQ co-ordinator)

The above accounts suggest that the impact of GNVQ on teaching and learning practice was all-pervasive, ranging from the restructuring of the academic year, to the never-ending task of assessing students and recording progress. Lecturers had few positive comments about the qualification itself, and in Chapter Six, it becomes apparent that they worked around the qualification, rather than with it, in an attempt to create a worthwhile learning experience for students.

Summary

This chapter has explored the impact of markets and managerialism on teaching and learning cultures in further education, and considered how GNVQs contributed to changes to teaching and learning cultures in the context of the case study college. Even though the college was affected less than others by incorporation, major changes to lecturers' practice were nevertheless brought about by the introduction of the new qualification. The intensification of work as a result of GNVQ requirements is apparent in lecturers' accounts. The effect on lecturers' sense of professionalism is summed up by Alan (Business):

> There's an awful lot of us want to be as professional as we can, but we just haven't got the time to be professional. What we do is, we cut corners. Minimalists they call us but we're not, we haven't physically got the time to do what we've got to do. It's alright being a committed lecturer, but the thing is if you haven't got the time to do the job as well as you would like to do it, then of course there's nothing ... you haven't got a magic wand or anything. (Alan, Business Studies)

And yet, as Chapters Six and Seven show, lecturers maintain their sense of professionalism through a strong commitment to students, despite the pressures they face. There remains of course the question raised by Easthope and Easthope (2000): for how long?

Chapter 5: Methods and methodology

Introduction

The previous chapter introduced the context in which the fieldwork undertaken for this study took place. This chapter explains the methods used for the fieldwork. The fieldwork for the study examines the experience and perceptions of students and lecturers involved with GNVQ. At the time when the fieldwork took place (1997-1998), publications from a range of sources, including NCVQ (1995b), awarding bodies (for example RSA News, 1996), practitioners (Smith, 1996) and practitioner guides (Gibson, 1996; Glover, 1995) used examples of teachers' and students' experience to praise GNVQs. The examples cited glossed over the complexity and problematic nature of the qualification for those involved in putting it into practice, and did not match comments made by college lecturers with whom I worked on Certificate in Education programmes, and my experience as a TVEI advisor supporting the introduction of GNVQs in schools and colleges.

Critical literature on GNVQs which had already been published did not tend to include fieldwork with practitioners (for example, Gleeson and

Hodkinson, 1995; Hodkinson and Mattinson, 1994; Hyland, 1994; Spours, 1995). Subsequently, work has been published by a number of writers, for example Bates (1997, 1998), Bloomer (1998), Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999), Ecclestone (2002) Edwards et al (1997) and Helsby (Helsby et al, 1998; Helsby, 1999). Here, a critical view of GNVQ is presented, drawing on the experience of both teachers and students. My research contributes to this body of work. It partly confirms previous findings, but it also adds a further dimension by focusing on how teachers and students constructed a particular notion of the GNVQ learner. Constructions of the learner were connected with students' orientations to learning, which in turn affected how the purpose of GNVQ was defined.

This chapter provides a critical account of the methods used for the study. The first part of the chapter discusses the rationale for the methods used. It addresses how I position myself in the field of educational research, and relates this to how I came to do the research as I did. The second part of the chapter considers the methods used to undertake the fieldwork, and relates these to the values underlying the research.

Researching young people's transitions in the 1990s

This study is concerned with the experience of 'ordinary' young people (Brown, 1988) taking GNVQs, and the continuing risks and uncertainties surrounding youth transitions for such young people. This reflects a wider concern with social justice. What I mean by this is explained by Griffiths (1998):

> Social justice is concerned both with individual empowerment and also with structural injustices; that is, with questions of power and resources available to individuals and to particular communities or sectors of those communities. (Griffiths, 1998, p.13)

My examination of the experience of GNVQ aims to further an understanding of the changing nature of the power and resources available to teachers and 'ordinary' young people. Drawing on Griffiths' reference to empowerment does not mean that I am seeking to give power to others. I agree with Gore (1992), who suggests that we must be more humble in our claims, and that in many cases, academics are more likely to inform the research community than directly inform practice (Ozga, 2000).

Researching policy

I could have researched GNVQ as a policy problem, looking for solutions to the troubles which have beset the qualification since its inception.

Such a problem-solving approach would certainly be favoured by policy-makers (see Hammersley, 1994; Blunkett, 2000). However, Dale (1994, p.40) warns that 'the self-imposed limitations of a problem-solving approach severely curtail its ability to solve problems.' I have not approached the study in this way. Rather, I have followed a critical policy sociology approach (Ball, 1997), which, as Ozga (2000, p.40) puts it, aims to find out how things work rather than putting them to work.

This does not mean simply describing how things are. According to Dale (1994), critical policy sociology should seek to change rather than merely analyse education. It involves seeking to understand better how things are, by asking questions about how the prevailing order came to be (Ozga, 2000), but it also means having a view of how society might be, and being prepared, in Griffiths' (1998) words, to get off the fence. Policy sociology often tends to be informed by critical theory, which is concerned with 'the social relationships of inequality, injustice, and exploitation.' (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000, p.292). It means that theoretical deliberation guides research activities (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980; Ozga, 2000), driven by models of the 'raced, classed and gendered structures of contemporary societies' (Denzin, 1998, p.332). A theory-led approach means being informed and guided by certain theoretical concerns and issues; at the same time, such an approach does not preclude new understandings and new theory from developing out of the

research.

However, critical theory can be criticised for imposing the voice and the values of the researcher on the groups studied (Denzin, 1998), leading to comments that sociologists often appear to be self-righteous (Silverman, 1993) and arrogant (Sparkes, 1998), assuming the power to act as the 'transformative intellectual' (Lincoln and Guba, 2000, p.165). The current challenge of post-modernist thinking demands of all researchers that they are 'alert to the kinds of power game involved in securing any historical or theoretical account as the dominant one' (Blake, 1997, p.299). Gore's (1992) analysis from a feminist perspective of the way that 'transformative intellectuals' may assume the taking and giving of power, yet actually serve to disempower others, offers a useful note of caution.

I am therefore alert to issues of equality and social justice, but I have not set out with the preconceived intention of proving that GNVQ contributes to inequality. I believe that research which has a concern for social justice must involve a recognition that there is no one right answer (Griffiths, 1998). Indeed, I chose Midlands College for this case study in order to avoid a context which from the outset might be likely to offer a negative view of the impact of GNVQs. The fieldwork aimed to develop a picture of what GNVQs meant for lecturers and students in the case study college, rather than to seek out evidence of injustice and

exploitation. At the same time, my interest in GNVQs is linked to a concern with patterns of inequality, which have been documented in literature on previous forms of initial PCET, and which are acknowledged in official policy on GNVQ. I am therefore interested in how far the experience of GNVQs in the case study college indicates that they may be continuing or overcoming patterns of inequality, by examining the ways in which lecturers and students constructed GNVQ through their own agency, and what that may mean in practice for GNVQs and broad, vocational education more widely.

Structure and agency

Critical policy sociology encourages a focus not just on structures, but also on agency (Ball, 1997; Ozga, 2000). Raab (1994) warns that this does not mean foresaking structure for agency. While human agency must be taken seriously in explanation of policy, 'so, too must the context of action within structures and processes located at other sites, or enveloping all of them, and providing the constraints and opportunities for action.' (ibid, p.25) Ignoring the wider context can lead to what Raab describes as 'mindless empiricism' (ibid, p.18), and small scale empirical studies which do not explore questions of broader theoretical interest.

Policy structures therefore need to be examined in relation to how those policies are mediated by the agency of those who experience them on the

ground, with a view to exposing the unintended consequences of policy. Thus it is important to examine policy at a micro as well as a macro level (Ball, 1990), or in terms of what Evans and Heinz (1994) refer to as policy as espoused, policy as implemented and policy as experienced. Ball (1990) describes espoused policy as:

> a half-written text, a story outline; its detailed meaning and practice lie in on-going struggles related to the interpretation of its key components. (Ball, 1990)

Qualitative methodologies tend to be favoured by education policy analysts who wish to consider agency as well as structure (Halpin, 1994, p.198), and the fieldwork for this study follows Stake's (1994) description of qualitative case study research. He states that:

> Qualitative case study is characterized by the main researcher spending substantial time, on site, personally in contact with activities and operations of the case, reflecting, and revising meanings of what is going on. (Stake, 1994, p.242)

However, I hesitate to describe my research as ethnographic, although Hammersley (1994, p.149) uses the term to refer to qualitative research in general. Other writers, too, use ethnography to refer to many different forms of qualitative research, as indicated by Denzin and Lincoln's (2000a, p.xv) comment that 'we can no longer take for granted what anyone means by *ethnography*, even in traditional, realist, qualitative research'. Critical ethnography makes more specific claims. Fontana and

Frey (1994) state that critical ethnography:

> relies on critical theory; it is ethnography that accounts for the historical, social and economic situations. Critical ethnographers realize the strictures caused by these situations and their value-laden agendas. (Fontana and Frey, 1994, p.369)

For me, ethnography requires sustained immersion in the field using a wide range of methods for collecting material (Powney and Watts, 1987) and I do not believe that I have had the opportunity to immerse myself in the culture of Midlands College, to the extent that I can claim that my study is ethnographic. At the same time, I see my work as contributing to a wider body of research on youth transitions, which describe themselves as critical ethnographies (see for example Bates et al, 1984; Coles, 1988a; Gleeson and Mardle, 1980). These studies have contributed to my understandings and interpretation of GNVQ, and I would describe my work as informed by a tradition of critical ethnography, though not part of that tradition due to the limitations of this particular study.

A case study of Midlands College

The fieldwork took the form of a case study of one college of further education in the Midlands, 'Midlands College' [2], undertaken during the academic year 1997-1998. The college was chosen as a relatively typical college of further education located in one of the Midlands conurbations.

It was typical firstly, in that it served an ethnically diverse community, and secondly, in that it lay in close geographical proximity to a number of other colleges and providers of post-compulsory education and training, and potentially faced competition from them. However, in other ways Midlands College was unusual, for the college had not faced major disputes with lecturing staff over pay and conditions. This choice was deliberate; many colleges during the 1990s were involved in acrimonious disputes between management and lecturing staff, and faced accusations of misuse of funds (see for example Crequer, 1999; Kingston, 1999; McGavin, 1999; Russell, 1999) and GNVQs represented part of the change and intensification of work which added to the burden faced by lecturers in the new, post-incorporation FE sector. It was hoped that by selecting Midlands College, GNVQs would not be completely submerged beneath concerns about insecurity of employment, and the need to maximise market share and increase student numbers. Whilst it is important to set GNVQ in this wider context, for many lecturers in further education the impact of incorporation was so great that other questions paled into insignificance.

As the study progressed, Midlands College appeared increasingly atypical, as more and more colleges faced external investigations into their practice, and massive redundancies were both threatened and

[2] The name of the college and all interviewees' names have been changed.

carried out (Beckett, 1999; The Lecturer, 2000a, 2000b). It is important therefore, throughout the following chapters, to remain aware that this is a study of a 'singularity' (Bassey, 1999, p.59), which can contribute to wider understandings of issues, but which does not claim to be representative of those issues in all their complexity. It could be argued that the college gives some indication of what GNVQ might have been like in pre-incorporation conditions, though this was not the original intention of the study.

The strengths and limitations of a case study

Stake (2000) describes case study as a choice of what is to be studied, which does not define which methods should be used. This case study uses a qualitative approach, with semi-structured interviews used as the main method of gathering information. The advantage of a case study is that it allows for in-depth study within a localized boundary of space and time (Bassey, 1999, p.58). At the same time, the study of a 'singularity' begs the important question of what can be learned from the single case (Stake, 2000). Schofield (1993) suggests that qualitative case studies can offer valuable insights which are of use beyond the case itself, if sufficient detail of the context is provided, to allow for comparison and contrast with other sites. Stake would define the Midlands College study as an 'instrumental case study' (2000, p.437), for I use the particular case of

Midlands College to provide insights into the nature and purposes of GNVQ in relation to youth transitions. In Bassey's terms, it is a 'theory-seeking case study' (rather than theory-testing (Silverman, 1993)), which means that it can lead to tentative suggestions about how a particular case can inform wider understandings of an issue, by putting forward what Bassey refers to as 'fuzzy propositions' (Bassey, 1999, p.62).

As a case study, this research has both the strengths and limitations of a study of a singularity. It has allowed me to examine in-depth the experience of GNVQ in one context, and to focus on the way lecturers and students constructed GNVQ policy in practice. I wanted to move away from description of the technicalities of implementation which has tended to dominate much of the literature on GNVQs. Whilst I believe my analysis and interpretation does so, the use of a case study has both helped and hindered this. It is quite easy to fall into a detailed description of every aspect of GNVQ implementation which can be drawn from the fieldwork, and in a number of earlier papers related to this research, I tended to do this. I am indebted to the people who listened and responded to those papers and helped me to focus on the issues which emerged as the most significant in the case study. In particular, these discussions helped me to identify the focus for my interpretation, which is the ways in which GNVQs are defined in relation to students' orientation to learning, how this affects teaching and

learning, and the importance of relationships between teachers and students.

Carrying out interviews

In-depth interviews were used as the main method of data gathering. I interviewed a range of interviewees in order to build up a picture of GNVQ in Midlands College, including lecturers involved with GNVQ, students on GNVQ programmes, college managers, and two Awarding Body external verifiers who came in to the college to verify, or monitor, GNVQ programmes. Below I explain the choice of interviewees, mindful of Dale's (1994) comment that: 'the relative importance and relevance of those interviewed should be made explicit rather than being left to be assumed.' (Dale, 1994, p.36)

I had no prior links with the college, and my first point of contact was the principal. However, I did not want my research to be seen as sponsored by the college management, and also wanted to avoid associations with monitoring and inspection, as I wanted to gain an insight into lecturers' and students' perceptions and understandings, rather than be presented with an official view of GNVQ. Therefore, once permission had been given by the college principal, I avoided working through the senior management team of the college, and made my main point of contact, or 'key informant' (Woods, 1999, p.4) the college GNVQ co-ordinator, Gail,

who was based in the Business Studies department. She was at the lower end of the middle management scale, and proved to be an ideal key informant. She was knowledgeable about all GNVQ provision in the college, and was respected across vocational areas for the support she provided.

Three vocational areas, Business, Science and Information Technology (IT), as well as the Foundation Studies Department were included in the study, in order to cover a variety of vocational areas as well as all levels of GNVQ (Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced). A number of different vocational areas were included, because it was anticipated, as Helsby (2000) suggests, that different subject/vocational areas, and the culture and traditions of different departments, might affect work on GNVQ and perceptions of it. In addition, the fieldwork included all levels of GNVQ. Published research has tended to focus on Advanced and Intermediate GNVQ (for example FEDA et al, 1997; Edwards et al, 1997); the goal here was to try to develop a more rounded overall picture of GNVQ. At the same time, I wanted to identify vocational areas, where GNVQ was considered by the college to be running successfully. I did not want critical analysis of the fieldwork to be dismissed as reflecting inexperience with GNVQ or poor practice. I also wanted to avoid vocational areas which were offering GNVQ in an unusual way – one department for example, ran their GNVQ programme in the workplace,

and their students were employees of the company concerned. Although such instances may have been fascinating in their own right, my focus was on 'ordinary' kids, and their experience of following a fairly typical GNVQ course.

The combination of these concerns, and consultation with the college co-ordinator led to the choice of Business, Science and IT. Business was selected because it represents one of the 'big four' most popular GNVQs (FEDA et al, 1997), and had led the way with GNVQ developments in Midlands College. Science was included because it is considered to be an 'academic' GNVQ, and in fact was taught within the Humanities Department in the college, alongside A-level provision. IT was chosen because it represents a vocational area which appears to be clearly associated with developing the skills needed for a high technology information society. This area was also recommended by the cross-college co-ordinator. While Intermediate and Advanced levels were taught by staff located in specialist subject divisions, Foundation GNVQ was taught separately in the Foundation Studies department, so a member of staff from this department was also interviewed.

Gail, the college co-ordinator, identified an initial contact in each area, and through each of these contacts I then asked additional lecturing staff if they would be willing to be interviewed. This allowed me to identify

lecturers who were what Powney and Watts (1987) refer to as willing informants, who were sensitive to the area of concern, and who were willing to commit the time to being interviewed. However, although in all cases lecturers were willing informants, they varied in their enthusiasm for, and critical views about, GNVQ.

By gaining access to lecturers through Gail, I was not seen as sponsored by the management of the college. At the same time I needed enough credibility with lecturers for them to be prepared to give up their time for me. When I introduced myself, I used my professional role as a teacher trainer for staff working in post-compulsory education and training as a point of engagement with lecturers. As a result I tended to be viewed as another professional in the field, who had an understanding of the issues being discussed, and the relationship between myself and lecturers was one of a co-professional.

The students in the study were identified through the lecturers interviewed, and were drawn from the same vocational areas. They included students of all levels of GNVQ. Halpin (1994) warns that access is often negotiated at the top, but not with those who have little or no ascribed status, especially students, who are given no option but to co-operate. I told the students who I was, what I was doing and asked if they would be willing to talk to me, but it would be disingenuous to

claim that they had an entirely free choice, given that I was, in their eyes, sponsored by their lecturer. Furthermore, their responses were influenced by the way they perceived me. Because I gained access to students via their lecturers I was seen as a teacher, or possibly some other educational professional, as indicated by the following comment from Susanne, a Foundation GNVQ student, who explained in response to one of my questions, 'it's hard to answer that because you're a teacher too.'

In addition to students and lecturers involved in the teaching of GNVQ, I interviewed two senior managers, two cross-college co-ordinators (including the GNVQ co-ordinator) and two of the college's external verifiers for GNVQ, in order to situate GNVQ in the wider management, ethos and culture of the college. The total number of interviewees is summarised below.

Vocational area	**Total students**
Foundation	7
Business Intermediate	6
Business Advanced	11
IT Intermediate	4
IT Advanced	3
Science Advanced	7
Total students interviews	38
Total students taking GNVQ in Midlands College 1997-1999	192

Table 3: summary of students interviewed

Area	Total staff
Foundation	1
Business Studies	3
IT	4
Science	3
Cross-college co-ordinators	2
Senior managers	2
Total lecturing staff interviewed	17
Total full-time equivalent lecturers in Midlands College	273[3]
College external verifiers	2

Table 4: summary of staff interviewed

The interviews with both students and staff were in-depth, semi-structured interviews, taking approximately thirty to forty-five minutes with students, and from one and a half to two hours with staff. They took place in the college, in a place which was convenient for interviewees, usually an empty classroom. All interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of the interviewees, and the tapes were transcribed in full. Only one interviewee asked for the tape recorder to be switched off at one point during the interview, when he felt that his comments were too confidential to be recorded.

The interview schedules took the form of questions which were intended to encourage interviewees to describe and comment upon their experience of GNVQ (see figures 4 and 5). Managers and external

verifiers were asked similar questions to those in figure 4, but with the emphasis on managing and verifying rather than teaching. The schedules acted as a prompt to me as interviewer. After an initial opening question, further questions followed on from responses, rather than following the schedule, so that by the end of each interview, all questions had been covered, though not necessarily in the order shown.

[3] Not all lecturing staff would teach on GNVQ programmes.

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR STUDENTS

1 Choosing GNVQ
Why did you chose GNVQ?
How did you chose GNVQ?
Views about doing GNVQ
Academic achievement at school
Views of: parents, school, peers

2 Why did you choose this college?

3 What's it like doing GNVQ?
What do you enjoy?
What don't you like?

4 What does doing GNVQ involve?
Give an example of what you have to do for a unit or an assignment.
What do you do in timetabled sessions?
What do you do for/What do you think about:

grading themes	action planning
	information seeking and information handling
	evaluating
key skills	communication
	application of number
	IT

Do you work in groups/individually? Which do you prefer?

When and where do you do GNVQ work?

5 What makes a good GNVQ student?
What makes a good GNVQ teacher?

6 What are you getting out of doing GNVQ? (emphasis on vocational knowledge or key skills or something else?)

7 Would you encourage friends or family members to do GNVQ?

8 Do you have a paid job as well as doing GNVQ?

9 The future
What do you want to do next?
What is your goal in approximately 3 years' time. Why?
When/how did you decide?
Who has helped you decide what to do?
Has GNVQ affected your decision?

10 Conclusion of interview
One thing you would change about you and what you have done so far?
One thing you would change about GNVQ?

Figure 4: Interview schedule for students

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR GNVQ LECTURERS

1 Tell me a bit about what your job involves.

2 What is it like teaching GNVQ? What does it involve? Is it different to teaching on other qualifications?
What's good about GNVQ?
What's bad about GNVQ?

3 What do you think of
Key skills
Grading themes?

4 Who are your GNVQ students and what are they like?

5 What sort of skills do you need/what sort of person do you need to be to teach on GNVQ programmes? What makes the ideal GNVQ teacher?

6 What do you see GNVQ as for?
Vocational qualification?
Broad-based transferable skills?
Route into employment?
Route into education?

7 Would you encourage your own children to do a GNVQ?

8 How do you see the future and the place of GNVQ?

9 How did you come to be teaching in FE?

10 Do you see FE as having a particular role in the education system?

11 How do you see the future for you?

Figure 5: Interview schedule for GNVQ lecturers

The research methods literature (for example Bell, 1993; Cohen and Manion, 1994; Powney and Watts, 1987) is full of helpful advice and checklists on how to plan and conduct interviews. In reality, it was a much messier affair. A suitable environment for an interview sometimes turned out to be a stock cupboard. With lecturers, my interview prompts were generally very effective in encouraging them to talk and me to listen. With students, this was less the case. On one occasion when I was

interviewing a student, I switched off the tape recorder after ten minutes, when I realised that I was the only one who had said anything more than "yes" or "no", and asked if the student really wanted to take part in the interview. He came back later and we repeated the interview.

Sometimes the students' answers highlighted the need to rethink the phrasing of my questions, as demonstrated in the following 'sensible' answers to my 'silly' questions:

Question to GNVQ IT student

AMB: So what does doing an assignment involve, what do you actually have to do for an assignment?

Kabir: Well whatever the questions ask.

Question to GNVQ Foundation student

AMB: What about the Science bit, what do you do for that?

Kadim: You have to do Science for that.

Analysing the interviews

The preliminary analysis of the interviews used the computer software package NUD*IST to draw together all responses under a number of key headings (see Figure 6).

```
(1)                 /identity
(1 1)               /identity/staff
(1 1 1)             /identity/staff/biography
(1 1 2)             /identity/staff/future
(1 1 3)             /identity/staff/work on GNVQ
(1 2)               /identity/students
(1 2 1)             /identity/students/biography
(1 2 2)             /identity/students/destinations
(2)                 /GNVQ
(2 2)               /GNVQ/compare other quals
(2 3)               /GNVQ/perceptions
(2 3 1)             /GNVQ/perceptions/future
(2 3 2)             /GNVQ/perceptions/your children
(2 4)               /GNVQ/purpose
(2 5)               /GNVQ/students
(2 7)               /GNVQ/R staff students
(3)                 /T&L GNVQ
(3 1)               /T&L GNVQ/teaching GNVQ
(3 2)               /T&L GNVQ/learning GNVQ
(3 3)               /T&L GNVQ/assessment GNVQ
(3 3 1)             /T&L GNVQ/assessment GNVQ/exams
(3 3 2)             /T&L GNVQ/assessment GNVQ/assignments
(3 4)               /T&L GNVQ/paperwork GNVQ
(3 5)               /T&L GNVQ/tracking
(3 6)               /T&L GNVQ/monitoring progress
(3 7)               /T&L GNVQ/progression
(3 8)               /T&L GNVQ/GNVQ programme
(4)                 /key skills
(4 1)               /key skills/staff
(4 2)               /key skills/students
(4 3)               /key skills/communication
(4 4)               /key skills/application of number
(4 5)               /key skills/IT
(5)                 /grading themes
(5 1)               /grading themes/action planning
(5 2)               /grading themes/information
(5 3)               /grading themes/evaluation
(6)                 /FE general
(6 1)               /FE general/perceptions of FE
(6 2)               /FE general/teaching in FE
(6 3)               /FE general/changes
(6 4)               /FE general/T&L not GNVQ
```

Figure 6: NUD*IST index tree for GNVQ project

Under these headings, the material offered a detailed picture of the experience of GNVQ in Midlands College, and these data are drawn on in Chapters Four, Six and Seven. However, whilst this picture was interesting and concurred with the research into GNVQs referred to at the beginning of this chapter, it remained descriptive. In order to move

beyond description to analysis (Bassey, 1999; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996), I used the concepts and ideas discussed in Chapter Three to develop a deeper understanding of the data, drawing in particular on Macrae, Maguire and Ball's (1997) model of students' orientations to learning (see Chapter Three).

*Using NUD*IST*

There is considerable debate about the strengths and limitations of using computer software programs for qualitative research, and the effect they can have on the research project. While LeCompte and Preissle (1993) unquestioningly recommend the use of qualitative data analysis programs and claim of computers that 'In themselves, they have no influence on the research process.' (ibid, p.279) other researchers, including the designers of NUD*IST themselves (see Richards and Richards, 1998) are more cautious, and discuss the possible effects of using software programs in some detail.

There is some concern about the emphasis given to code and retrieve methods, which may encourage researchers to see this method as the only way to deal with qualitative data. Richards and Richards (1998) point out that many researchers do not use code and retrieve and many more would not do so if the software did not support it:

> Before computers, many researchers did not code segments of text. Rather, they felt through, explored, read and reread [...]. This required a simpler and more complex form of data management, as researchers compared and systematically built upon data records, keeping growing memo records about the accruing evidence and their exploration of its narrative and convincing body. Theory was arrived at and tested not through the retrieval of text chunks but through complex processes of evidence analysis, including consideration of knowledge about the site or story that is not in the text. (Richards and Richards, 1998, p.214)

By contrast, the concern with an orderly, organized structure for the data analysis, links with claims made by programs such as NUD*IST to offer enhanced validity, reliability and generalizability. These claims appear to be based very much on understandings from quantitative research.

Fielding and Lee (1998), for example, suggest that the software makes replication of a study much more feasible, by using the facility to keep a log or trail of analytic procedures, which many software programs offer. It may also make larger-scale research easier, both in terms of the numbers of researchers involved and the size of the study. Fielding and Lee thus believe that computer software can give legitimacy and credibility to qualitative research, suggesting that with other approaches to analysis:

> There is sometimes a suspicion that the analyst has done little more than string together a series of 'juicy' quotes extracted from transcripts. By contrast, the computer encourages users to be clear about what they are doing. (Fielding and Lee, 1998: p.58)

Richards and Richards (1995) claim that computer software is an important means of validating qualitative research:

> critical examination and reporting of the indexing process is central to validation. By reflection on and documentation of the process of category construction, the researcher accounts for and argues for interpretations. Categories need to be documented by an 'audit' trail recording not only the relationship of categories to each other, but also the origins and histories of categories. (Richards and Richards, 1995, p.81)

In contrast to the above views, Coffey, Holbrook and Atkinson (1996) are very critical and warn that:

> It is important to avoid the misapprehension that coding and computing lend a scientific gloss to qualitative research. The growing 'respectability' of qualitative methods, together with an adherence to canons of rigour associated primarily with other research traditions, can lead to the imposition of spurious standards. (Coffey, Holbrook and Atkinson, 1996, ¶7.6)

In a response to Coffey, Holbrook and Atkinson (1996), Lee and Fielding (1996, ¶2.2) argue that: 'Far from propagating an orthodoxy, developers, popularizers and commentators have often stressed the need for epistemological awareness and debate in relation to software use.' They believe that computer-based methods allow for the multi-tooling of qualitative researchers, 'making available to them more or less at will a wide range of different analytic strategies.' (ibid, ¶2.2) I found that the most important guiding principle was the question: 'did you *want* to do that?' (Richards and Richards, 1998, p.212), or as Stanley and Temple

(1995) explain:

> researchers need to commence any piece of research by asking some fundamental and linked questions about just what kind of analysis they want to carry out and what kinds of analytic outcomes they want the research to produce. (ibid, p.178)

In practice, I used NUD*IST as a cut-and-paste system to structure the interview material under headings, and then abandoned the software and worked from a combination of the printouts of data gathered under the headings and my original transcriptions to continue with the analysis. For, as Stanley and Temple, who are critical of such software, suggest:

> The Ethnograph and NUD*IST are particularly good at retrieving and placing in a separate file a range of pieces of text which have been coded or indexed in a particular way, complete with the line-numbers of this text. (Stanley and Temple, 1995, pp.189-190)

Although I found the coding of material useful, the analysis developed away from NUD*IST, as I immersed myself in the data in more traditional ways, by reading notes, transcriptions and printouts, and comparing my data with other literature in the field.

Interpreting the data

The fieldwork chapters do not report in detail on responses to each question listed in the interview schedules. They present an analysis of

the material based on what Coffey and Atkinson (1996, p4) refer to as 'principled choice'. As Stake (1994) observes:

> The issues used to *organize* the study may or may not be the ones used to report the case to others. (ibid, p.239)

The chapters quote extensively from the interviews, which were originally transcribed in full, including pauses, hesitations (such as ehm) and tag words (you know). However, these have largely been removed in the reporting. This was a conscious decision, even though it may remove some of the immediacy of the interview. All interviewees received transcripts of their interviews and their main response was embarrassment at the way they appeared to express themselves, when what they had said in conversation with me appeared verbatim in the written transcript. I felt that it was important that their words should be reported in a manner which respected their views. My concern that a full transcript did not do so, was confirmed by an angry letter from one student, who argued very strongly that the transcript of her interview made her look stupid (Julie, Advanced IT). In my reply to her, I acknowledged her criticism, and explained that I would remove repetition, hesitation and such like from the transcripts.

My interpretation is intended to offer an empathetic understanding of the experience of the lecturers and students in the study (Schwandt, 2000).

This is an important ethical issue for me. Fontana and Frey (1994) suggest that:

> to learn about people we must remember to treat them as people, and they will uncover their lives to us. (Fontana and Frey, 1994, p.374)

This applies not only to the stage of gathering fieldwork material, but extends to the interpretation and analysis. The fieldwork chapters do not intend to judge, condemn or condone, but to interrogate the material for how it can inform a better understanding of young people's transitions.

The fieldwork chapters on lecturers' and students' constructions of GNVQ, focus on perceptions of who GNVQ is for and what purpose GNVQ serves particular students, and they discuss how these factors affect wider understandings and perceptions of GNVQ. I have followed an interpretive approach, starting with detailed analysis and moving on to interpretation. It was in reading, rereading and talking about the material that I moved towards the interpretive concepts used. The conceptual framework also came out of wider reading. My original broad themes were influenced by the concerns raised in literature on GNVQs. However, it was recent literature and research which I would categorise under a broad heading of learning society participation, such as the work of Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999), Fevre, Rees and Godard (1999), Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson (1996), and Ball,

Macrae and Maguire (2000), set alongside earlier literature on the new vocationalism discussed in Chapter Two, which helped me to make 'sense' of the material. Two questions put forward by Coffield (1997) in his paper on understanding the concept of the learning society proved very helpful, even though they appear obvious: who is participating? and what are they participating in?

In addition, I developed my interpretation out of discussions and presentations of my work involving a range of different people (Bathmaker, 1998; 2001a; 2001b). Denzin (1998) refers to all of the above as the 'art of interpretation'. For Denzin, interpretation is not a matter of spending hours developing indexing systems for field data, it is about telling stories:

> Field-workers can neither make sense of nor understand what has been learned until they sit down and write the interpretive text, telling the story first to themselves and then to their significant others, and then to the public. (Denzin, 1998, p.317)

Denzin's description certainly reflects how I developed my understanding, though my 'significant other' did not display a marked interest in any of my stories (but to whom I owe many months of domestic chores).

The final interpretation of the interviews uses a typology developed by Macrae, Maguire and Ball (1997) in relation to participation in a learning

society (see Chapter Three). I used this typology as a heuristic device, as a means of interpreting the material; it helped me to move beyond explaining the fieldwork, to interpreting and understanding it (Schwandt, 2000, p.191). I did not start out with the typology and with the aim of collecting examples of different sorts of learners, or to focus on a particular sort of learner. Although this would be possible, and potentially useful in future work, such an approach might also limit as well as enhance understanding. Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000), for example, started out with Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson's (1996) theory of career-decision making, with a view to applying, but also extending it, rather than simply allowing it to define their own work.

Implicit in the above, is a recognition that the interpretation I offer is a story, which I have constructed. What is referred to as the crisis of representation (Hammersley, 1997; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000a; Stronach and MacLure, 1997) means that 'qualitative researchers can no longer directly capture lived experience.' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000b, p.17). Rather, they must recognise that lived experience is created by the writer, and is influenced by the position of the writer. Instead of demonstrating how the researcher has remained objective and impartial, and removed their own bias from the research, it is important that researchers acknowledge their presence, and make their position clear. As Schwandt observes:

> We do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth. (Schwandt, 2000, p.197)

I have therefore attempted to contextualise my position as a researcher, in order to explore what has influenced my interpretation.

Credibility and relatability

An interpretive case study poses challenges to traditional understandings of validity, reliability and generalizability within a positivist research paradigm. The importance attached to the position of the researcher within the research process, and with providing rich description of the research context, suggests a quite different way of considering the 'validity' of research material compared with controlled experimental design. Most forms of interpretive research would not lay claim to reliability in terms of the replicability of their work. As Schofield puts it:

> The goal is not to produce standardized results that any other careful researcher in the same situation studying the same issues would have produced. (Schofield, 1993, p.202)

At the same time, it is important to be able to evaluate whether a piece of qualitative research is making a legitimate knowledge claim (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000b). Furthermore, the extent to which the knowledge claim may offer insights beyond the immediate case studied is an important

concern for qualitative researchers, an issue which is considered in detail by Schofield (1993) in her paper on the generalizability of qualitative research.

In the place of traditional validity and reliability, Powney and Watts (1987) suggest that qualitative research should be systematic and rigorous, and should lay out the research process for others' scrutiny. Plausibility is emphasised by other writers; Silverman (1993) suggests that the interpretation should be judged on the plausibility and credibility of the evidence on which it is based, and Bassey (1999) refers to enquiry which offers plausible interpretations of what is found, which are conveyed convincingly. Schofield (1993) suggests that detailed contextualisation, including discussion of whether a case is chosen as typical or unusual (whilst recognising that these terms remain fraught with difficulty) can help others to decide how far the analysis may be generalised more widely.

I have aimed to address these issues in a number of ways. I have explained the methods used to collect and analyse the fieldwork material, and discussed how choices were made and ideas developed. I do not make claims to objectivity as a researcher, rather I have explored the subjectivities which I bring to the research. I have explained the situated character of the accounts in the fieldwork (Silverman, 1993) and, in

drawing on interview material, acknowledge that I am considering the perceptions and understandings of participants, which are neither true nor false (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996), but which are their versions of experience. The discussion of the fieldwork (Chapter Eight) is linked closely to the material presented in Chapters Six and Seven, and draws conclusions based on the fieldwork, whilst relating these to my overall research questions (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980, p.132). I also presented my work and my developing understandings to various audiences, to the participants in the case study college, to colleagues, at conferences, and to students on university courses, and drew on their responses to inform my interpretation.

My story contributes to the changing picture of what learning is about for young people, but at the same time, I have tried, as Denzin (1998) suggests, to learn from previous studies. He writes:

> And so the stories we tell one another will change and the criteria for reading stories will also change. And this is how it should be. The good stories are always told by those who have learned well the stories of the past, but who are unable to tell them any longer because those stories no longer speak to them, or to us. (Denzin, 1998, p.340)

The responses of lecturers and students in the fieldwork concurs with other research into young people in further education and into the experience of GNVQs, to be found in the work of Ainley and Bailey

(1997), Avis (1988), Bates (1997, 1998), Bloomer (1997), Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997; 1999), Ecclestone (2002) and Helsby et al (1998) amongst others. My interpretation is informed by similar concerns with social justice and inequality which are apparent in their work. In this way I see my work as adding to a body of qualitative research concerned with young people's participation in formal learning. I would also locate my research within a wider research programme on youth transitions and participation in a learning society. This recognition has come out of the research process. The body of work on the new vocationalism was not matched by a similar, identifiable body of work on the learning society in the 1990s when I started this research. Perhaps my own picture of the field is becoming clearer at the same time as more researchers use the banner of lifelong learning to relate their work to that of others.

Inevitably, as I have developed my own knowledge and understandings during the research process, particular issues have become more significant and could be dealt with differently in retrospect. For example, Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) emphasise the importance of geographical space and locale, which goes far beyond simply situating their account in context, and suggest that young people's experience may be strongly influenced by the location in which they are growing up. Their analysis offered me a sudden flash of the obvious, or an Aha-Erlebnis, which has come too late for this current piece of research.

This study therefore offers knowledge which is provisional and revisable in the light of critique (Griffiths, 1998). Gleeson and Mardle (1980) suggested at the beginning of the 1980s that writing involves constructing an interpretation of practice which is plausible, and more plausible than any other explanation. Twenty years later, I am more tentative about whether even this degree of certainty is possible. Although I have aimed for an interpretation that is plausible, I do not claim to offer the only plausible interpretation. Contrasting stories may and will be told; my intention is that my story, which can only be partial in its understanding (Stanley and Wise, 1993), should be one of the plausible interpretations of young people's experience, which may therefore further a wider understanding. My claim therefore is to uncertain knowledge, in the belief that there is no stable, unchanging state of knowledge (Griffiths, 1998). However, my study remains influenced by a guarded optimism that it is worth struggling for justice, knowledge and understanding, while accepting that there will be no final victory (Griffiths, 1998, pp.76-77).

Limitations of the methodology

This case study is limited to an in-depth focus on one college of further education. I could have included more institutions, and possibly contrasted different types of institution - schools, sixth form colleges and

further education colleges. However, I wished to avoid what might become invidious comparisons between seemingly 'better' or 'worse' practice, in favour of gaining a more detailed picture of how GNVQ was interpreted and understood in one particular site. I believe the data which emerged from the study, reported in the next two chapters, indicate that this was an appropriate decision.

The main method of data collection was interviews with lecturers and students, though I also attended meetings at the college, and GNVQ classes, as well as collecting a range of college documentation. These additional data sources were used to support and confirm the understandings I gained from the interviews. I considered additional approaches to gathering data, in particular observation of GNVQ classes and asking students and lecturers to keep diaries or records. I decided against these approaches because this study was undertaken at a time of great upheaval and intensification of work in the further education sector. I did not wish to burden practitioners and students with providing material for my study, which did not have any immediately obvious benefits to themselves. I also did not wish to appear as yet another person inspecting their provision as I felt that this might affect what lecturers in particular were willing to say in interview, especially as the college underwent an FEFC inspection in the year in which the fieldwork took place.

The number of lecturers and students in the study is not large. In relation to lecturers, my rationale was that I sought out staff who had an interest in GNVQ, and who did not automatically perceive the qualification as a burden and a 'dumping ground' for all the problems facing FE at the time. I felt that it would be too easy for others to dismiss data that appeared to come from disillusioned and demoralised staff. In relation to students, I stopped interviewing when I realised I was hearing confirmation of stories I had already heard, rather than gaining new and different insights. Despite the limitations in the size of the study, I believe that these decisions were the right ones in the context of this piece of research, and do not detract from the quality of the data collected.

Summary

This chapter has critically discussed the methods used and the methodological approach to this study. The discussion problematises the issues raised rather than offering clear answers. As justification for this, I would suggest that positioning oneself in research in the present context, requires 'productive continuing conversations' (Ozga, 2000, p.54), and that a convincing methodology may not be able to offer certainties, but does need to worry endlessly at its own terms (Clough, 1994, p.6).

Chapter 6

Lecturers' constructions of GNVQ

Introduction

The following two chapters examine how lecturers and students in Midlands College constructed teaching and learning in GNVQs. The first is based on the perspectives of lecturers, and the following chapter, on the perceptions of students.

This chapter starts by providing a brief introduction to the lecturers who formed part of this study and the four departments in which they were based. The introduction is intended to establish the departmental context in which lecturers worked, and give a sense of their professional identities. The main part of the chapter is organised under the following themes:

Perceptions of the purpose of GNVQs

The impact of GNVQ requirements on teaching and learning cultures

Perceptions of students' orientations to learning

A culture of caring and helping the students

Perceptions of GNVQ

Although it was anticipated that different vocational areas, which drew on different occupational connections and different subject and teaching traditions, might influence the way GNVQs were perceived and constructed (Helsby, 1999), the differences found in Midlands College turned out to be less to do with the knowledge base and occupational culture of different GNVQ vocational areas, and more to do with organisational issues within the college. While there were both similarities and differences amongst lecturers in their perceptions and constructions of GNVQ, the key differences in Midlands College were between the Foundation Studies department, where GNVQ was perceived to have a different purpose to the Intermediate and Advanced levels of the qualification, and between the Information Technology (IT) department compared with the Science and Business Studies departments. In the IT department, the impact of college reorganisation of IT facilities had a major impact on lecturers' morale, and was reflected in rather different perceptions of GNVQs compared with lecturers in Science and Business. In order to draw out these similarities and differences, Business, Science and IT are considered together, and Foundation Studies discussed separately.

The departments and lecturers in this study

Business Studies

The Business Studies department was the first department to introduce GNVQs in the college, to replace its BTEC First and National courses. The department was seen by the assistant principal to lead the way in GNVQ development, and the college GNVQ co-ordinator was a member of the department. Staff from main grade lecturer to head of department contributed to the GNVQ programme, and there was a strong collegial culture amongst staff. Business GNVQ recruited students who were interested in Business Studies, and also students who were undecided about what to study. The latter were encouraged at enrolment to choose Business, as a subject which kept their options open. There was a gender imbalance towards male students taking GNVQ, which the department believed was partly due to the proximity of a large girls school, which offered sixth form courses. The majority of students were from a minority ethnic background, predominantly Pakistani and Indian.

Science

GNVQ Science was part of the Humanities Department. This was where all of the college's A-level provision was located. The Science lecturers interviewed for this study were all specialists in one of the traditional

academic disciplines of chemistry, biology or physics. They taught both A-level and GNVQ, but not vocational courses, in contrast to other GNVQ areas, where lecturers were likely to teach on vocational programmes as well as GNVQs. They offered Intermediate and Advanced GNVQs, but low student numbers meant that only Advanced level was running at the time of this study. A considerable proportion of the students were young women, particularly compared with students taking A-level sciences who were mostly male. In the first year Advanced out of a group of 19, a third was female. In the second year Advanced group, which only constituted five students, the whole group was female, all of whom had progressed from Intermediate GNVQ to Advanced.

Information Technology

The Information Technology (IT) section offered vocational and academic programmes, including GNVQs in Information Technology at Intermediate and Advanced level. In the academic year when the fieldwork took place, the computer facilities in Midlands College were reorganised. In September, the college opened a Learning Development Centre (LDC), which housed most of the computers available for student use, both for teaching purposes and independent study. Previously, the IT section had taught classes in its own suite of computer rooms. The

decision to dismantle these rooms and move all computers to the LDC, was seen as a management decision, which went against the wishes of the lecturing staff in IT. All classes took place in the LDC, and lecturers worked with groups of students in an open plan environment housing approximately one hundred computer work stations. This was disliked by both staff and students. While the value of an open learning facility was recognised and welcomed, the difficulty of running taught sessions in such an environment led to problems ranging from noise levels to lack of access to whiteboards and overhead projection facilities. Lecturers found it impossible to supervise students' work as closely as they had done in the past, and they were aware that students' attendance had dropped, and that when they were present students were often off-task. One rather drastic solution to keep students on-task was the removal of Internet access from all but two rows of computers. The changes brought about by the LDC had a strong impact on lecturers' perceptions of GNVQ.

Foundation Studies

The Foundation Studies department was differently conceived to the other departments in this study, which were organised around particular subjects or qualifications. Foundation Studies was designed to meet the needs of particular students and was very much a separate entity. The department offered entry level qualifications, including basic skills

numeracy and literacy, as well as level one qualifications. The GNVQ students in the department were low achievers or non-achievers. They often had a history of learning or behavioural difficulties in their previous educational careers. They were seen as needing a caring and supportive atmosphere and considerable structure to their learning, rather than a strong vocational focus. The students were mainly from minority ethnic backgrounds, Pakistani and Indian, and the majority was male.

The lecturers

Table 5 provides a summary of the educational background and career paths of all the staff interviewed at Midlands College.

Table 5: Educational background and career paths of staff interviewed at Midlands College

Name Responsibilities Vocational area	Qualifications	Years at Midlands College	Career summary	Career Goals
Mike Curriculum manager Business Studies	A-levels Bed Primary Degree in economics	18	B Ed for primary teaching at teacher training college. Taught in secondary schools. Part-time FE teaching and part-time study for degree. Full-time lecturer in Midlands College Subject and working with students are important: 'I think of myself as a teacher.'	Work on more HE level courses
Gail Cross-college GNVQ co-ordinator Business Studies	Ordinary National Diploma Degree in Hotel and Catering Management PGCE QTS Secondary	3	Worked for gas company in employee services for 2 years, then spent a year in Australia, working in IT. Spent 18 months travelling in Australia and Asia, followed by 2 years as a bar and bistro manager. Completed 1 year school-based teacher training programme (secondary), then moved into FE. Working with students is important. 'I don't really want to leave FE. I've found a job that I want to do.'	Further positions of responsibility in FE without losing contact with the students

Name Responsibilities Vocational area	Qualifications	Years at Midlands College	Career summary	Career Goals
Julia Business Studies	A-levels Degree PGCE QTS secondary Currently completing MA	3	Took A-levels, went to university, completed PGCE secondary, and was appointed immediately to present job. Working with students is important. Does not want to be a manager: 'I don't think I want all the pressure of it.'	Move forward in FE without losing contact with students
Alan Business Studies	Degree Cert Ed FE	15	Left school with no qualifications. Worked in retail trade, running shops. Moved into FE in 1981. Teaching students is important: 'I have enjoyed the teaching.'	Anticipating retirement
Louise Section leader IT	Degree in English HND in Computing	10	Following degree, found there were no career opportunities, so completed IT trainers' course. Led to part-time teaching in FE and then a full-time post at Midlands College. 'I wouldn't encourage my own children to come to the college. There is not enough control now, so a young student can drift. That's to do with the contact time and the lack of whole group teaching.'	Move into industry as a trainer. Does not want to move further up management spine away from teaching.

Name Responsibilities Vocational area	Qualifications	Years at Midlands College	Career summary	Career Goals
Tony IT	Not known	Not known	Manager of community centre which is part of the college. 'I can't see the day when Oxbridge will quote a GNVQ grade, so that's why A-levels will continue. I wouldn't quite claim myself as a great success, and I probably would have done better with GNVQ, but whether it would have got me what I wanted is open to question.'	Move up management ladder in FE
David IT	Degree in Chemistry HNC in Computer Studies C&G 7307	4	Part-time visiting lecturer for the first 2 years, then got a permanent contract. 'I'd like to have a spell in industry. It might be a case of the grass is green somewhere else, but I'm looking elsewhere.'	Move into industry, to do computer programming

Name Responsibilities Vocational area	Qualifications	Years at Midlands College	Career summary	Career Goals
Afsar IT	Degree PGCE FE	8	Worked in industry as a project manager. Moved into FE because of cutbacks in industry. 'I particularly enjoy teaching technical subjects, higher level technical subjects. I'm bored with the lower level subjects, but you've got to have a mixture of all levels really, because if you only did the high level work you would fail to understand or appreciate the way a student is developing from the lowest levels to higher levels.'	Feels there is no room to progress
Steve Cross-college key skills co-ordinator IT	Degree PGCE QTS secondary	7	Spent some time abroad 'dodging and wheeling and dealing through the system', taught in secondary for 3 years, then moved into FE, to work on higher level courses. Enjoys the rewards of working at HE level with people coming in from industry.	Further management responsibility

Name Responsibilities Vocational area	Qualifications	Years at Midlands College	Career summary	Career Goals
Jill Science	Degreee in Physics PGCE QTS secondary	5	Trained and taught in secondary schools. 12 years at home raising family. Worked in a research laboratory for a time. Returned to work supply teaching, then part-time in FE, now full-time. 'I like the older students and the examination work.'	None identified
Chrissie Science	Degree Teaching Diploma in Education MA in Education	7	Taught part-time in a school and part-time in FE, then 6 years in another FE college with responsibility for school-college liaison. Subject is important, and the science education of girls: 'as long as I can teach my students and give them a bit of care along the line that's all that really bothers me. If I can just inspire some students to carry on through, that'll do me nicely.'	About to move to head of department post in girls' grammar school Would consider working in schools, FE or HE in the future

Name Responsibilities Vocational area	Qualifications	Years at Midlands College	Career summary	Career Goals
Shafiq Science	A-levels Degree in chemistry PGCE FE	3	Considered teaching in schools, but found it required too much disciplining of pupils. Taught in FE for 7 years before moving to Midlands College. Subject is important: 'I like to teach A-level chemistry.'	Become subject leader but does not wish to become a manager
Kate Foundation Studies	City and Guilds 730 Cert Ed FE Degree	2	Worked in school for the blind, then au pair in USA, returned to UK and worked as care assistant and learning support in FE. Completed Cert Ed FE part-time and moved to Midlands College. Wants to work away from inner city: 'I'd rather go back to a place like the [name of college outside city] of this world, to those students, because these students are incredibly tough, incredibly demanding.'	Move out of inner city FE. Subsequently left college to work for Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB)

Name Responsibilities Vocational area	Qualifications	Years at Midlands College	Career summary	Career Goals
Kath Assistant Principal	Degree and QTS for schools	12	Taught in schools and then moved into FE. Involved in staff development for BTEC. 'Our principal says that you know you've got it right with a college when you'd be happy to bring your own children to it. If it's good enough for your kids, it's good enough for anybody else's.'	Move to principal or assistant principal post in a larger college
Bill Quality manager	Degree in physics PGCE QTS	Since 6th form college merger	Career teacher. Worked in sixth form college prior to working at Midlands College. 'I probably spend far too much time talking to students. […] I understand that it's about teaching as opposed to just imparting information.'	Stay in present management role, seeking continuing variety

Five out of the thirteen lecturers interviewed, and the two senior managers, had trained as school teachers, and ten had a teaching qualification, but they were not career teachers who had moved smoothly through the education system and straight into teaching jobs. Only Julia described herself as moving from school to higher education and then straight into full-time teaching in FE. At the same time, lecturers in the case study had not followed the 'traditional' route from industry into FE teaching, as the career summaries in table 5 show. The diversity of routes by which lecturing staff came to be teaching in further education is demonstrated in the following examples.

Mike, in the Business Studies department, who was responsible for curriculum planning as well as teaching GNVQ, went to a traditional boys grammar school and took A-levels. He achieved the A-level results to go to university, but went to teacher training college and trained as a primary teacher. He explained why this was:

> I suppose I came from a very working class background, Mum and Dad had got a council house. I always felt out of place at the school and didn't have the confidence to apply to university, though on balance with my A-Level grades I would have got in. So I always felt hard done by. I always knew I wanted to do another Degree after my BEd, because I thought "I want to prove to myself, I can do it". And although I quite enjoyed Primary, I just didn't feel I wanted to spend my life, my original degree was in history, and I didn't want to spend my life making stories up about Henry VIIIth.

He taught in secondary and then part-time in FE, completed an Economics Degree part-time while teaching in FE, and then obtained a post teaching Business Studies full-time.

Kate, in Foundation Studies, came into FE 'by mistake'. She worked in a school for the blind, was an au pair in the USA, studied some psychology, then when she returned to England, got a job as a care assistant in a college, and while she was working at the college, completed City and Guilds 730, a Cert Ed and then a degree. She said that her career had 'just evolved.' She came to work in Midlands College Foundation Studies department, when, as she explained, someone asked:

> "Kate, how do you fancy teaching GNVQ? Tomorrow?" I'd done a bit of research on GNVQ for my Cert Ed, and I said "alright then I'll have a go". It was literally a nightmare, the whole of last year. By this time last year I was ... pretty fragile.

Only two lecturers described themselves as coming from industry, Alan in Business Studies and Afsar in IT. Alan was pleased to move into FE. He had been in retail, running shops and buying and selling, before moving into FE in 1981 and completing a degree and a Cert Ed while teaching. He described his own transition from school to work as follows:

> I left school with no qualifications at all. I went into my father's business at 15. FE was a second chance institution. You used to come to FE to top up your skills and go

> forward and do qualifications, professional qualifications, vocational qualifications.

His education did not evoke memories of better days:

> We look back and we think how wonderful it was when we were kids. But the thing is I had an awful education as a child, so I'm not really looking at that. My education came later in life and I must admit I enjoyed the local college at that time. I had a thirst for it, the typical late developer I suppose.

Afsar, by contrast, described his previous career in the following terms:

> I was in the front end of technology in industry. I was used to dealing with professionals. And I had a section under me. I controlled projects, so it was fairly high profile, and demanding work.

He moved into FE because of cutbacks in the industry eight years previously, and completed a PGCE while working at the college. He stressed that he saw himself as working with higher level students:

> I think it's important that you understand that when I say high level courses, I mean I'm involved with HE courses, HND and degree level, and I have also worked with a number of universities in the Midlands.

All the lecturers interviewed were permanent employees of the college. Their ages ranged from Julia (Business) and Kate (Foundation) who were younger members of staff, to Alan (Business) who was nearing

retirement. The other eight were at some point in the middle of their employment career. Between them they had varying lengths of experience in further education, ranging from two to twenty years. Although they did not describe themselves as actively choosing to teach in FE, a number said that they had actively chosen *not* to work in schools for reasons related to discipline and ethos (for example, Mike, Steve, Julia, Shafiq). As Gail (Business) explained about her experience of teaching in a school:

> I shouldn't really criticize too much, but it seemed an awful lot of shouting and not enough talking.

For both lecturers and students, college was seen as having a different culture and ethos to schools, which allowed for what they perceived as better, less discipline-dominated relationships.

All the lecturers interviewed defined themselves in terms of their educational role, and apart from Julia and Alan in Business, and Kate in Foundation Studies, they spoke of working with higher level students, meaning students taking advanced level qualifications or above. Commitment to the students was a feature of all the interviews, but the two younger members of staff appeared to have more tolerance to cope with the lower level Intermediate and Foundation students. The common factor in their different biographies was the diverse nature of their career paths, none of which, which the exception of Julia (Business

Studies), represented a smooth, traditional pattern of progression.

Constructing teaching and learning cultures in GNVQs:

Business, Science and Information Technology

Perceptions of the purpose of GNVQs

In Business, Science and Information Technology, GNVQs were seen as an educational rather than an occupational route. GNVQs represented a 'second chance' route for students who had not achieved the grades at GCSE to progress straight to A-levels. Intermediate students were expected to continue to Advanced, and Advanced students to progress to higher education, either to HND or degree programmes. In Business, this pattern was seen as matching the aspirations of the students:

> The majority of our students are Asian students and they see the importance of education, so the vast majority of them are seeing GNVQs as stepping stones so that they can get into higher education. (Alan, Business)

Mike (Business) believed that the educational role of GNVQs was partly a response to the economic climate:

> In the long run increasingly more stay on in education. I think the recessions of the 80s started that trend off a bit and people just say "oh, my cousin did that course and he went on to HE so I'll do the same". People perceive it like A-levels in that respect now. "It's a course I do, which I go onto a degree from." Whereas 15 years ago, people who did BTEC National, a lot more went into work. There aren't

> the jobs now, effectively the school leaving age is about 25 now really. And you can't kick against that. (Mike, Business)

Julia (Business) commented that credentials were now essential in order to find a good job:

> Sooner or later everybody's going to have a degree. If you haven't got one you're going to be that workforce that the Government need to do all the crappy jobs. You're going to be left packing fish fingers. (Julia, Business)

In Science GNVQ was firmly geared towards students progressing to higher education in science-related subjects, and students were encouraged to increase their chances of getting a university place by taking an A-level alongside GNVQ:

> We have tried to encourage some of the students to do an A-level alongside a GNVQ so there are some doing evening A-level chemistry, some evening biology or human biology. So they're trying to get their UCAS points[4] up that way really. (Jill, Science)

In the previous year, all students who completed their Advanced GNVQ progressed to higher education to take degrees in applied science subjects, and four out of the five second year students at the time of this study wished to move on to university. GNVQ was seen as suited to students who were unlikely to succeed at A-level. Chrissie described

[4] UCAS: Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, the system through which students apply to university in England, which allocates a point score to qualifications and the grades achieved in them.

GNVQ students as 'a little bit shaky on their GCSEs' and Shafiq explained:

> The students that we're getting are perhaps not as able academically as A-level students and they can't do as much as an A-level student probably could do at the first go. (Shafiq, Science)

Based on their qualifications on entry, and an interview with Science lecturers, students were told whether they were suitable candidates for GNVQ or A-level. Shafiq suggested that 'most of them will come on to the course because it's an easier one to get on to than an A-level', and Jill and Chrissie said GNVQ students preferred course work and were daunted by exams.

In IT, the purpose of GNVQ was described in a similar way:

> It's used by students to progress in education. The Intermediate students usually continue on to Advanced, the Advanced students will continue on to university or an HND. Particularly for the Asian students, whose families see education as important. (Louise, IT)

The impact of GNVQ requirements on teaching and learning cultures

Teaching and learning were partly shaped by the requirements imposed by the qualification, but these were mediated by lecturers in response to the perceived purpose of GNVQ as an access route to higher education, and the perceived needs of the students. In Business Studies, lecturers

used a range of methods, including more 'traditional' teacher-centred methods as well as student-centred learning, justifying their choice on the basis of how the students would learn best, and what they needed in preparation for the future:

> I think if they get used to having mini-lectures or whatever you want to call them, it trains them quite well for university, which I think we have to bear in mind as teachers, we have to think about where they're going to as well as where they've come from. (Mike, Business)

Lecturers in Science felt much more constrained by the requirements of GNVQ. Jill (Science) described the role of the GNVQ teacher as ensuring that students could meet the assessment criteria, by structuring coursework assignments in such a way that students could fulfil vocational unit and key skills specifications, as well as grading requirements. Shafiq (Science) contrasted learning in A-levels, where books and teachers were the main sources of information, with GNVQs, where students needed to learn how to gather and organise information from a variety of sources. Students were expected to work things out for themselves, with as few teacher-led sessions as possible. Jill explained how she saw the teacher's role as follows:

> With GNVQ we've got the specs. So what I do, I write my assignments so they cover all the specs in the assignment work. I do very little formal teaching with them. It would be say at the beginning of an element, maybe one or two sessions, I may formally teach them. Sometimes I don't, sometimes I'll say "the information is here or there, find it out for yourself", which gives them grading possibilities if I

> don't spoon feed them. So the assignment work is designed so that they find out what is on the specs. (Jill, Science)

Chrissie explained that she had relied on the students to induct her into the GNVQ approach:

> I must admit I panicked at first. It's been tough going, being new to the GNVQ ethos as well and making sure all the PCs [performance criteria] are covered and whatever so that was tough for me. It's difficult to take that step back and let them take more charge of their learning and their research and I still think I probably interfered a little bit too much at first, but luckily I came into the second years and the second years have had good grounding in the first year so they knew the GNVQ philosophy so they helped me tremendously with that. I've been gently coaxed in by the students more than anything. (Chrissie, Science)

Despite their apparent acceptance of the GNVQ ethos, Jill nevertheless felt that she was not doing the proper job of teaching:

> It's a different way of teaching really. You feel like you're not doing your job properly because you turn up to a lesson, say one of the support sessions, and you may not have your lesson planned because you want to find out where they're at with their assignment, and then you will take it from there, so it feels funny sometimes. (Jill, Science)

Trying to allow students to learn for themselves presented Science lecturers with a number of problems. They welcomed the emphasis on practical and applied work, and on students seeking information for themselves, yet it was time-consuming:

> If I'm really worried about them, if I'm feeling really pressured time wise I'll make sure that I get the books out

> from the library and I'll make sure the books are in the lab, I'll say there is information in the lab and then suggest that they look, but for the most part we just manage to just go down to the library altogether. (Jill, Science)

As Jill's comment suggests, lecturers tried to disguise any proactive role they took in students' learning. At the same time, they monitored students' independent learning carefully. Jill explained:

> Jill: I think we tried to trust the students too much to go to the library to find out information, and they just got lost some of them, some of the Intermediates. So now I control it a lot more.
>
> AMB: So when you control it a lot more what do you do?
>
> Jill: I'll let them go down to the library but they have a strict deadline to come back again and check up with me or I will go down with them to the library. I won't do it for them but I'll point them in the right direction and I'll stand over them while they do it.

Students did not necessarily understand information just because they had collected it themselves, and Chrissie felt that students might need teacher-led sessions to introduce and explain difficult topics and concepts, even though she believed that it went against the ethos of GNVQ.

Despite such concerns, lecturers did not question openly whether the role of helper was always appropriate to enable students to learn, though it was quite different to how they described their typical A-level practice, where the syllabus was covered through teacher-led classes, and practicals were used to illustrate theory, rather than a means of students

working things out for themselves. For Science lecturers, working on GNVQ was about learning to fit into the ethos of GNVQ by suppressing past experience.

One reason why they accepted the new role of helper was that whole class teacher-led sessions were not popular with the students, as explained by Chrissie:

> They're not very receptive to being taught at all, it is actually quite a struggle to talk and chalk through with them but I just feel in some of the topics it is actually needed. They don't like it. They like to come and, you know, give me the work and let me, I'll sort it out sort of attitude. (Chrissie, Science)

Although teaching and learning centred around the need to complete assignment work, the flexibility of submission procedures made it very difficult for lecturers to impose deadlines for assessment. The GNVQ system required them to assess work regardless of whether it had met internally set deadlines. This, along with the possibility of any number of resubmissions, had a major impact on lecturers' working practice, increasing their workload considerably as a backlog of assignment work built up. However, there was a dilemma here, for lecturers also recognised that this flexibility was welcomed by many students. They could not fail, and there was the chance that they might succeed eventually. In Business Studies and Science, lecturers were pro-active as

well as reactive in addressing the backlog. Extra provision was laid on, which students were cajoled and persuaded into attending using a variety of sanctions and warnings. Extra classes were arranged, referred to as 'mop-up' groups, to get students through their coursework. These took place at the end of each semester, in the last semester of the two year Advanced programme as an alternative to additional units, and also in the September after students were supposed to have completed their qualification. To persuade students to attend, Gail (Business) used the threat of not getting to university as an incentive:

> If you don't attend I'm failing you, you will be coming back in September and not going to university. (Gail, Business)

Privileges were withdrawn, for example students were banned from the college gym. Tutors sent letters home, and in Gail's words: 'At the moment we're shouting at them a lot.'

In the IT department, Louise believed that the changes brought about by GNVQ could not be disentangled from other changes:

> I don't think the change in course has made that much difference. It's a combination of factors, I don't think it's one particular factor. It's the calibre of students we're getting, it's also the amount of time we've got to spend with them, and it's the fact that we're having to teach in different ways, because of the new centre. I think all these things add up. (Louise, IT)

The open plan LDC in which they now taught, and the reduction in

course hours, meant that GNVQ was seen as part of wider problems, over which lecturers felt they had little control. Louise felt that 'GNVQ has almost had to come out of the reduction in course hours.' Teaching was a constant struggle against rather than with the students. Louise explained:

> It's more of a struggle for us, certainly for the time that we've got them, which is less than we've ever had, to bring them up to any sort of standard. And I think that's especially apparent this year. It's the sort of discipline, or trying to impose some sort of discipline, and the motivation of students is definitely deteriorating. (Louise, IT)

The interpretation of flexibility within GNVQ meant that lecturers felt powerless:

> Attendance is a problem too. We could fail people in the past for attendance below 80%, but there is nothing we can do any more. (Louise, IT)

GNVQ epitomised all the things which IT lecturers felt they had lost: 'good' students, control over the teaching and learning environment, and a previously valued qualification leading to worthwhile achievement. Their current experience was in marked contrast to the past, as Louise explained:

> What worked, and we were all happy with, was that, say in a two hour session, you could have half an hour to an hour that was all input. It was still teacher led, in the front, telling students what they needed to know, telling students what you wanted them to be able to do, and then some sort of practical work. Or it was 20 minutes of each. But you

need a classroom environment to do that, where you've got the students in one place, you've got the machines, and you can alternate as you need to between input and them actually doing something. That's much more difficult in the centre for a number of reasons. You can't get their attention in the same way. They're not as focused because there's far more distraction around them. They can't always hear you. You can't get them round one table. Even trying to use a white board or OHP is very difficult in there. And so, what we're doing, we're changing the way we teach really, which is doing a lot more worksheet work, where you're actually handing out things that they've got to read and then do something from the worksheet. Which, with the best intentions, with the most skilful people producing the worksheet, it does not work as well as the old method, I don't think. (Louise, IT)

The pressures, especially the reduction in course contact hours had changed the lecturer's role to one of monitoring and checking up on students:

I think one thing that I've found is that we do a lot more prodding of students than we used to. We're continually on their backs saying have you done this, have you done that. Whereas in some ways it was easier to actually deliver a project, than to check that they're finding these things out themselves. There's a lot more work involved and it turns you into a different type of person, because you're just chasing people really instead of actually feeling like you're delivering a product. So I think there have been some fundamental changes since I started. And most of them I don't think are that good. (Louise, IT)

Perceptions of students' orientations to learning

Students were a key referent (Helsby, 1999) for the work of all the lecturers in the study. The status of GNVQ as a second chance qualification meant that GNVQs were seen as suitable for a particular

sort of student. They were not for students who were the most successful at GCSE, but they were also not for young people who showed no interest in taking advantage of a second chance. In the lecturers' eyes, students' orientations to learning fell within the range of what Macrae et al (1997) define as hangers-in, notional and strategic acceptors.

Even 'good' GNVQ students were not described as the 'embedded learners', who are at the centre of Macrae et al's model of learning. They were 'pragmatic acceptors', who saw the necessity of studying in order to improve their chances of getting a good job, and worked hard to gain the necessary credentials. Some students matched this ideal conception, but a considerable number did not.

In the IT department, their conception of a 'good' student was an A-level or BTEC National student. Such students were described as much more able than GNVQ students. This included A-level students who had failed to achieve the grades they needed to enter higher education, and who stayed on at college to do year zero of a degree. Afsar explained this:

> I find that the A-level students, even where they have failed, generally perform better. Their basic skills are better, their analytical skills are better. Their way of grasping things is better and their way of looking at a problem is very different. Even though some of the A-level students I have seen are very bright, are very capable of doing things, through complacency or neglect or attitude they sometimes do not perform well, but generally I find that there is more ability in them than the other students. (Afsar, IT)

Julia (Business) described an 'ideal' GNVQ student as someone who demonstrated commitment, who worked hard, was able to work independently, and who managed their learning successfully:

> Very strong students will take work home. Whereas you've got the other ones who don't, who need to, but won't. Arif, he's in college every single day except Friday because he goes to work. He does all his work, he does his own research, he does work at home, he hands work in. (Julia, Business)

Good GNVQ students managed their own learning by asking for help and responding to the advice they received, and came in to college to do work on their 'days off'. Shafiq (Science) explained:

> It's very important that they attend regularly. So attendance is a must, regular attendance. Keeping up with the work is another thing and I think if they've got those two then everything else they will learn slowly. (Shafiq, Science)

Chrissie (Science) observed that the work ethic had been successfully instilled into some of her students:

> They utilise their time in college very profitably I must admit. They're there at the start and there at the end and they're still working and I suppose I used to doubt it at first, 'can we go down to the LDC?', but they go down to the LDC, they do the word processing, then they come back. They work. They have been kind of trained to manage time very effectively. (Chrissie, Science)

However, many GNVQ students at Intermediate and Advanced level did

not match the ideal, and showed no great commitment to working hard. The way they were described by teachers suggested that they fitted Macrae et al's category of 'notional acceptors', 'who behave as if education happens by a process of osmosis: by simply being present in the school or college it is somehow possible to 'become educated' even when playing cards in the common room.' (Macrae et al, 1997, p.12).

Various comments confirmed this:

> You can never find an Intermediate student on their day off. You can't find them on their day in, let alone their day off. (Julia, Business)

> You probably have taught 16-18s, and really half the time, I mean by the time they've giggled and they've joked and they've done all the other bits and pieces, only half goes in anyway.... I mean you're lucky if they take up half. And after you've taught them for an hour, I mean they start sort of going off the boil. (Alan, Business)

AMB: What do the students think of it?

Gail: The fact that they're there for the full three hours? 'You always keep me for the full three hours.' 'Yeah, well the only way to learn is to do it.' (Gail, Business)

Alan suggested:

> What you want to do is come in June. The thing is, about two weeks before they actually finish you have got everybody crawling out of the woodwork, people you haven't seen for three or four months that actually end up with an assignment to slap you with, please assess me before the external verifier comes in. I want to go to university. (Alan, Business)

Lecturers cajoled the students to improve their level of commitment, as

Julia described:

> One of the students, this is his fourth year, he's done three years of Foundation and now he's on his Intermediate. I said to him, "you've got to finish this year, I'm not having you sitting here, you're not looking at me for three years", I said, I just couldn't stand it. So, his first semester work he's finished, so hopefully he'll get out in a year. He's told his parents he's going to university next year. I said "you'd better go and hire a cap and gown, because I don't know what else you're going to do". (Julia, Business)

Jill (Science) suggested that some of the students could talk their way into or out of anything in the world outside college and tried the same strategy in college:

> A lot of them, they survive outside college by talk really, talking their way into everything and so they try it here. So for instance, I'd asked them to research about DNA fingerprinting, and so this chap produced this type-written sheet that said by A. G. at the bottom, and it looked like something straight off the internet. You know, it was just typical of the internet, the ultimate bar code sort of thing. He said I think "I should get a distinction for this", and I said, "A. G., I think this is actually off the internet, I can't even give you a pass for this, because it's not your work. If you use this information and put it together with lots of other information, then I can give you a pass on it, but I can't even give you a pass for this". And so he said "oh it's my work. I did it. I wrote it." So I tested him on it, and he didn't have a clue. He was thinking he'd get a distinction for printing a page off the internet and handing it in. (Jill, Science)

Where lecturers in Business Studies and Science tolerated the reluctance of students to work hard, in IT GNVQ students were seen as having low ability, poor motivation, and not appearing to gain much worthwhile knowledge. Louise believed that GNVQ students were 'a different

calibre of student' to BTEC students, and that 'the general standard that is actually coming out of the college is probably lower as a result', and Afsar questioned whether a student with Advanced GNVQ was equivalent in ability to someone with two A-levels.

Louise and Afsar summed up what typical GNVQ students were like:

> students with lower standards of general education when they arrive. They're not at all motivated. We've got 30, I think, on the GNVQ register at the moment, and of that 30, we've only had two who've actually passed all the external tests. We've probably got half the group that have passed perhaps two, and then we've got five or six who've failed everything. (Louise, IT)
>
> They don't seem to put in the amount of effort, which an A-level student would put in. I'm not saying all students lack commitment but the majority of them. (Afsar, IT)

Afsar suggested that students may choose GNVQ because they perceived it as an easy option:

> One thing which seems to be a factor which may be attractive to them, is that it's easy to do GNVQ, much more easy to them if you can repeat it as many times as you need without any penalties. (Afsar, IT)

In fact, 'typical' GNVQ students in IT did not seem very different in behaviour and attitude to 'typical' students in Business and Science. A significant factor which appeared to have influenced the rather different view of GNVQ students in IT, was the sense of powerlessness brought about by the teaching environment in which they now worked, and

which had had a considerable effect on teaching and learning, and relationships with students.

In all departments, there was a fine line between students who lecturers perceived to be notional acceptors who did not work hard, and students who showed no signs of ever completing any work, who were further out on the periphery of participation, and could be described as Macrae et al's 'hangers-in'. Shafiq described such students as lacking commitment:

> If they were committed to the course from day one then they wouldn't have to repeat it. Perhaps at the beginning of the year, we should explain to them a few times that if they stick to it they'll pass it and then they can get to university which is where they want to get to. (Shafiq, Science)

Business and Science lecturers either tolerated students' attitude and behaviour or saw it as disruptive, depending on whether they were seen as hangers-in or notional acceptors. A great deal of effort was put into trying to find ways to get notional acceptors to complete work, and in interviews with students, notional and pragmatic acceptors described this as a form of unwritten bargain between lecturers and students to help each other to get through the work (see Chapter 7). However, hangers-in who gave nothing in return, but only seemed to disrupt others, were not encouraged to continue with their course.

As a result, there was a high drop out rate in Business and Science.

According to Julia, the drop out rate from Intermediate Business was about 50 per cent. This was seen as getting rid of students who were not right for the course:

> They just walk out the class when they don't want to know and they just disappear and stuff like that. I know you've got to give them a chance but they're disruptive, they just disrupt everybody else and Intermediate students are bad enough as it is. (Julia, Business)

But it also raised concerns, not because of the need to keep the numbers up, but because it was seen as rejecting these young people once again:

> It isn't a production line where you shove kids out the end and if you have a few rejects, tough. Those rejects are important, they're just as important as the rest of them. I think we should beat the drum for them, and I always say the same things and sometimes I'm listened to, sometimes I'm not. But I keep on saying it. (Alan, Business)

Business Studies tried to balance these concerns by giving students until the end of the first semester (six months) to see if they could cope, by which time hangers-in had usually left of their own accord:

> You'd probably find before then they'd left anyway because of the fact that members of staff would tell them what to do and they couldn't handle just being told what to do, and they'd just walk out the classroom. (Julia, Business)

Science lecturers also took active measures to push students towards notional and pragmatic acceptance, and to remove students from the group who remained 'hangers-in'. At the end of each semester, students

who had not completed their coursework were required to attend and finish work during the inter-semester period, and a letter was sent home to this effect. If not they were 'sacked' from the course, with the opportunity of repeating the whole year again from September. In the previous year this was exactly what happened to students who were in their first year of Advanced GNVQ, as Jill explained:

> There's just five in the second year and there is a story behind that. Some of the lads, all year we said 'you've got to get your assignment work done'. We did everything we could to get the assignment work out of them. And it still didn't appear by the deadline. And so we carried through our threat and said 'Right, you've got so many units you haven't completed, you're going to have to repeat the year.' And so the girls carried on because they were conscientious, and a lot of the boys had to repeat. Some of them are still in the first year now, although we did lose some of them by the wayside, because they stomped off thinking that other colleges would take them on, which they didn't. (Jill, Science)

Comments from lecturers suggested that some students' orientation to learning did change. When students experienced success, their commitment to learning improved, particularly at Advanced level, when they felt that their course had some form of exchange value in the world beyond college. As Julia commented:

> Some of the Intermediate students we had last year have improved 500%. As soon as they've hit the Advanced, their whole attitude has changed 'cause I think they value it more. I think the Intermediates feel a bit disheartened in the respect that they are here and they're doing one year but it's not really going to take them anywhere, it's only going to take them on to the Advanced, where the Advanced think, well this is going to take me on to University and

> they value it more than the Intermediates do. (Julia, Business)

The effect of a valued credential could transform a student into an 'ideal' GNVQ student:

> Arif for example, who is an Advanced student now, when he first came on his Intermediate, he was a pass, but he's going to head for a distinction if he's doing the work he's doing now, and his whole attitude has changed. So he's started to become an ideal GNVQ student, but when he first came I don't think he knew what he was good at or what he was bad at really, because he was disheartened by his GCSE results. I think that upsets a lot of the students, when they come on, they think "well we're crap at everything, we didn't do very well in our GCSEs, what can I do. I'm not very good at anything". Now Arif will finish his Advanced and he said to me, "I'm not going to university", I said "yes you are", I said "you're an ideal university student". (Julia, Business)

In Science, Shafiq also described how one of the students had gained confidence and begun to succeed:

> I've got a student now, who was not very well treated at school, thought he was not so bright but it turns out he's got dyslexia. After the Intermediate science his parents came over to the college on parents' evening and they said how much change there was in the student. He's more confident now, he can talk to people. Before he used to be just alone at school but now he's able to communicate with other students. I think that's something that's come directly from the GNVQ. I think building confidence in students and helping them to learn, not just teaching them but helping them to learn something and making them understand something, even if it's a little bit, then that's good. (Shafiq, Science)

A culture of caring and helping the students

Lecturers showed a high level of commitment towards helping students to succeed who accepted the need for further education, whether the more typical notional acceptors, or ideally, the pragmatic acceptors. They defined their role as engaging with students who showed some signs of wanting to progress, by helping and supporting them with their studies. This involved constructing learning experiences which they felt were of value, whilst finding ways of surviving the bureaucratic demands of the GNVQ system.

In all the data from the case study, the theme of helping occurred regularly in interviews with both students and lecturers. Lecturers helped the students, and students described themselves as helping the lecturers in return, by doing some work (occasionally) and handing it in for assessment. Helping the students took a range of forms. In Business and Science, lecturers emphasised their open door policy, whereby students could come at any time, and they would get help with their work:

> If I'm not here then Tony will help them with my assignment and vice versa. If you don't get along with one of the members of staff then there's another member of staff who's willing to help you with the work. I must help the students with every assignment except Finance because I can't do Finance. But like Economy and Marketing, I don't even teach them, but they might find it easier to come and ask me to explain it, than maybe go to another member of

> staff that they get along with but not as well as they maybe do with somebody else. (Julia, Business)

In Science, lecturers committed a great deal of time to helping individual students. Shafiq explained what this involved:

> And so what you do is you're supplementing what they should be doing, giving them a handout, you're finding things for them, you're helping them along, nursing them along. (Shafiq, Science)

They followed the same open door policy as Business Studies, which required a high level of commitment and hard work:

> I suppose it is tiring but the door never closes and the students always know that they can come. I'm always and I think we all are, always willing to give as long as they're willing to receive. They are a very pleasant receptive lot, I mean I've always said I'll explain something 19 times to somebody as long as they are listening for the 19 times. It doesn't matter if they don't understand and I think we've probably all got the same ethos, we just give our time to the students. (Chrissie, Science)

Shafiq described an ideal GNVQ teacher as:

> Somebody who's got empathy with the students, because they're not always the brightest academically. Not somebody too formal, somebody who can sit in between them and help them along. (Shafiq, Science)

Julia (Business) too defined the ideal GNVQ teacher as someone who had the patience and the ability to empathise with the students:

> I think, especially in College, you've got to be able to communicate with them in a different way. You've got to see them on the same level as you because, yeah, you've got to get your assignment, but you've got to teach them that they've got to do work in their own time, they've got to go off and do those things. I think you've got to be flexible more in GNVQ as a member of staff. GNVQ students are far, far more rowdy than A-level students. I think that you've got to have a bit more of a sense of humour and you've got to understand that the students do have a lot of work to do and they do need extra help, and you've got to be willing to help them. There are students constantly knocking at the door. So you've got to have a lot of time really, you've got to be able to give up a lot of your time. (Julia, Business)

What encouraged lecturers to give so much of their time, was their relationship with students, which Chrissie described as being almost like a family:

> We tend to have a very good relationship, an incredible relationship really between the students and staff. I think they feel that there isn't that big dividing line, that they can talk to us and they can communicate with us. I thought that was a real nice pat on the back really. I often say I might as well just adopt them all and have done with it, go the full whack and I'll take them all home with me! (Chrissie, Science)

Chrissie had worked in schools and other colleges and believed that Midlands College was different from other institutions in this respect. She described the college as combining the caring ethos of a school, with an FE approach to treating the students as adults and on more equal terms. This contrasted with her experience in another college:

> it was just like a conveyor belt, there was no care, in a sense, for the students. It was just, you know, it was just a

> conveyor belt to get them out the other end with their qualification. (Chrissie, Science)

Regardless of their students' reluctance to work, lecturers in Business and Science said that they liked the students:

> I love my students and the rest of them recognize that. I suppose I'm one of the weird people that believe that there is goodness and there is importance in the people we actually teach. I think we're paid for this and we should give value for money. It isn't a production line where you shove kids out the end and if you have a few rejects, tough. Those rejects are important, they're just as important as the rest of them. I think we should beat the drum for them. (Alan, Business)

> I think most of our students are really nice. Some of them don't work, but they're still really nice. There's not particularly anyone that you really want to wring their neck. I think it's the fact that we are committed to the students, I think we all are. (Gail, Business)

Julia described herself as a friend as well as a tutor:

> I'm their tutor but I think I'm their friend as well and I think that's the difference with GNVQ members of staff they're friends to their students as well. (Julia, GNVQ)

However, in IT, in contrast to Business and Science, changes in practice including the introduction of GNVQs were seen as having a negative impact on relationships, both between staff and students and within the student group:

> I think it's made quite a big difference as far as our relationship with students is concerned. I don't think that we have the same time for tutorial support that we used to have, and I think they've lost out there. And also, from a group dynamics point of view, I think it's made quite a big difference. I don't think we get the gelling within groups that we used to get when I first started. (Louise, IT)

Where good relationships with students gave meaning to GNVQ in Business Studies and Science, it was the lack of such relationships in IT, which led to negative perceptions. Though the students may not in fact have behaved very differently from those in other departments, they were caught up in wider problems facing the IT department.

Perceptions of GNVQ

GNVQ as a qualification was subject to a range of criticisms and reservations. Mike, who was responsible for curriculum development in Business Studies, commented critically on the design of the Business GNVQ:

> What they seem to have done is taken an economics syllabus, cut it into bits, thrown the bits up in the air and said whatever way we write this out it mustn't look like an economics syllabus, but it must have those components, key components of an economics syllabus. But we'll start the wrong way round ... with something that no sensible economist would ever start with, and we'll put at the end what a sensible economics teacher would do in week three, that sort of thing. All you do is unravel it. (Mike, Business)

He was critical of the 'bitty' nature of GNVQ compared to the more

holistic nature of BTEC National. Drawing on experience from teaching BTEC, he challenged pressures to teach to the performance criteria:

> We tend to model it a bit on the old BTEC National Diploma, rather more than I think maybe the authorities would like. We see it as holistic I think, and vocational rather than like a bitty sort of .... But he [the External Verifier from Edexel][5] is quite into bitty. We never paid that much attention to PCs on the first course. We always said you're bound to cover, I mean even if you don't bloody cover them in the assignment, you'd cover them in a class exercise someday, wouldn't you, you would! You'd do them somewhere, I mean what's it matter? (Mike, Business)

In Science, where GNVQ was seen as preparation for university, Chrissie and Shafiq expressed concerns that GNVQs may not prepare students adequately for higher education. Shafiq was concerned that GNVQ students spent a lot of time collecting information without developing sufficient understanding. Chrissie confessed:

> I don't know sometimes if we're fooling the students academically because it's no use getting them through the GNVQ, getting them through with good grades and then letting them flounder in an institution that is notorious for not giving any or much additional back up. I mean, in FE colleges we're always there, we will give them the back up. Now I wouldn't like to fool them that, off they go and they're going to hold their own. (Chrissie, Science)

Chrissie believed that GNVQ students were 'good and very sound students' but needed bridging or foundation courses to succeed at university, because universities may be geared towards compensating for the shortcomings of A-level in terms of research skills, but they were not

prepared in the same way to compensate for GNVQ. Shafiq was less enthusiastic about GNVQ, revealed most clearly in his comments about A-levels:

> I hope A-levels stay as they are because I think that's still one thing that's academic, it's like a good standard. (Shafiq, Science)

The struggle to reconcile such concerns led to contradictory views. Shafiq suggested a reduction in volume in GNVQ, yet argued against 'diluting' A-levels:

> I wouldn't like them to dilute A-levels in any way, but if they added on perhaps two units or three units and taught them in a GNVQ way that would help.
>
> I wouldn't mind if there was half the content [in GNVQs], but you spent twice as much time and making sure that they've understood what you're on about. Not necessarily learning rules and things but actually being able to understand. I'm not always convinced that they understand. (Shafiq, Science)

In IT, perceptions of GNVQ were more negative. Afsar was wholly disapproving of GNVQs. He believed that 'the GNVQ culture is lacking in some way', which the students recognised and exploited, and that GNVQs should be replaced, and the A-level system upheld:

> My personal view is that I would want something replacing it. Something completely different. Well thought out. It seems to me it's not clearly thought through. I do not want A-level to disappear. (Afsar, IT)

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[5] Edexel: qualification awarding body

Louise, on the other hand, recognised that for her, the problems with GNVQ were bound up with wider concerns rather than the qualification itself:

> There is not enough control now, so a young student can drift. That's to do with the contact time and the lack of whole group teaching. I think the GNVQ is OK, it's the college environment that I'm less happy about. (Louise, IT)

Amongst Business lecturers there was a belief that GNVQs had a lot to offer but this was tempered with pragmatism about public perceptions of GNVQs, where GNVQ students were seen as:

> The lowest of the low and can't cope, and it's just something for them to do. These are people who can't do proper education, let's put them in here. Find something for them to do. Old-fashioned gold standard attitude. (Gail, Business)

> There is still the stigma of A-levels. You're still seen as being the top notch if you've done A-levels. I just wish universities accepted it a bit more and people in the workforce really knew what the students had to do to get it, 'cause it's hard work you know, the GNVQ Advanced. If somebody leaves with a distinction, then they've worked bloody hard over two years, and I don't think they realize that, and I think that's a shame. (Julia, Business)

> I've got brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, people that I know, business people, and they are very critical of GNVQ because it's failed to offer them what they wanted. (Alan, Business)

> Someone picks up on this and says, well I know somebody who did it and can't even switch a computer on, and the whole course then gets bad publicity. (Mike, Business)

Discussions about the positioning of GNVQ within the qualifications system revealed a range of views, which reflected similar variation to be

found in research and policy on post-16 qualifications. Julia saw GNVQ and A-level students as different:

> I think they're two different types of students. I think if you're going to combine that you're going to confuse two students, one who's an exam person who suits an A-level. Then you're going to try and bring them together with a student who can offer more than just sitting down and doing a 3 hour exam, who wants to, I don't know, improve their communication skills or whatever and you're going to try and put those two students together, I think you're going to cause a rod for your own back really. (Julia, Business)

Shafiq was concerned to protect the standard of A-levels:

> I know it's rhetoric or whatever but I really believe that A-levels should stay virtually as they are, maybe cut down the content and have one or two more to have a range or a broad spectrum of things but the teaching, stick with it because in A-levels you can still make it more interesting when you're teaching it with involvement and all the rest, you can still do that but the actual exams, the way they are set and marked I think that should stay. (Shafiq, Science)

For most lecturers, GNVQs were perceived as for certain sorts of young people, revealed in comments about how they would feel about their own children taking GNVQ. Chrissie would encourage her own children to do GNVQ based on:

> knowing where they want to head to, knowing how they are and how they respond to tasks and knowledge. Yes, no problem at all, as I said I think it's a very worthwhile course, so I've got no hesitation on that. (Chrissie, Science)

Mike explained:

> I have got twins, a boy and a girl and I would think it would be very suitable for my daughter, because she's a sort of average performer academically and she's quite interested in certain types of jobs. She's 14 at the moment so I could see her doing something like a Health and Social Care or if not that then an NNEB type[6] thing perhaps as a prelude to going to college to train as a teacher or something or maybe, I suppose the GNVQ would be the better one, really. Whether I'd say that about my son I don't know 'cause he goes to a grammar school and he's got a reasonable chance of doing OK in his GCSEs and A-Levels. But if he came at 16 and said "I really don't want to carry on doing this, I want to do Theatre Studies GNVQ or Media Studies" I'd say "well, if that's what you want to do, do it. It's your life". I think there is a certain snobbishness about would you let your children come to this college. (Mike, Business)

Gail's view was:

> I don't know, depend on the children really. It'll be their choice, I wouldn't dissuade them from doing it, I don't think. If they're capable of doing A-Levels, I'd still probably tell them to do them, because of outside perceptions. Not particularly because of the course, though I'm not sure with these changes and with subject knowledge probably being watered down, I don't know whether I would encourage ... I don't know. (Gail, Business)

Shafiq in Science said of his children that 'If they were very capable of doing A-levels, then I think I would say do A-levels.'

Thus GNVQ was primarily seen in relation to how it could help certain sorts of students. The overall perception amongst lecturers was that GNVQ was a means of getting back into education, and progressing towards further and higher education. It was rarely seen as vocational

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[6] NNEB: the NNEB (now CACHE) qualification is the most popular qualification for nursery nursing.

preparation for employment. Although GNVQs may have been perceived in this way elsewhere, including elsewhere in the case study college, the lecturers interviewed for the case study defined GNVQs in educational terms.

Constructing teaching and learning cultures in GNVQs: Foundation Studies

Perceptions of the purpose of GNVQs

Foundation GNVQ was treated almost as a different qualification from Intermediate and Advanced. In Foundation Studies the purpose of GNVQ was seen quite overtly as a way of encouraging young people who were on the edges of participation in learning:

> If you get them back into an education field, especially students at our level, you may stop them thinking, "oh right, I'm just going to go on the dole anyway and get benefits" and then if they achieve next year, they think "oh right, I'll go on to so and so at the next level", and so you're opening doors. (Kate, Foundation)

The focus was not on vocational knowledge and skills, but on learning how to fit into the requirements of the education system, and in particular the GNVQ system:

> We're teaching the students how to put an assignment together. I don't think it's specifically the work, I think that's the way I've changed my mind. It's more important

> putting it together, getting it in order, learning to take notes, learning the basics to help them for next year, teaching them the terminology of GNVQ, the way the marking system is and everything else, actually getting them to sit and write something is a major achievement for some of them. I mean if you get them to write for half an hour, you'd have thought they'd never written in their lives. 'Kate, I've got a cramp in my hand.' For goodness sake! (Kate, Foundation)

Teaching and learning were about developing the habits of participating in formal learning. While success was seen as a key factor in developing students' motivation and commitment to learning, Foundation Studies lecturers promoted learning habits, by enforcing strict frameworks related to time-keeping and attendance:

> When we started last September we'd have very, very poor attendance, atrocious time-keeping, no commitment. You weren't expected to come to work almost, it was just to go and play pool or go and meet your friends. And now we do have moderately good attendance, time-keeping is great because they get into trouble if they're late and we are getting work in. (Kate, Foundation)

Students who were more than half an hour late were required to report in and were then sent to work in the library. Lecturers spent a lot of time keeping track of students, and worked as a team to ensure students attended classes. They mobilised the help of college security to return students to classes if they were found around the college during teaching time. They phoned home, enlisting the help of the family, for according to Kate: 'The parents, the families do want them there.' And they phoned rather than wrote home, because students intercepted letters before

people at home found them.

Responsibility for managing learning was taken by teaching staff, on the basis that this was the only way to ensure that students completed work:

> In the last two assignments they weren't allowed to leave the classroom until that assignment was in so I had it straight off them. The last, that was the optional units, they didn't do a lot at home, it was all done in the classroom. Nobody left the classroom before half-term without handing in the assignments. And I said "look, 'isn't it much easier? You don't have to go home. You don't have to worry about it, it's in." And I would do that definitely with mandatory units next year, very, very tight deadline. (Kate, Foundation)

Perceptions of students' orientations to learning

Many of the students taking GNVQ Foundation were previously 'outsiders'. Kate gave a range of examples:

> Some have come with very low GCSEs, some are disaffected from school so they haven't been to school since they were 12, 13. Some just didn't sit exams last year, some left a couple of years ago and have come back suddenly thinking quick I'd better get some qualification. (Kate, Foundation).

Some students had attended special units, others had spent the last one or two years in India or Pakistan. Some had qualifications from other countries, but needed to improve their English. They were seen as being 'street-wise' but having poor basic skills in literacy and numeracy:

> They are incredibly street-wise kids, but their academic ability doesn't match their verbal ability. I think that's it. Verbally they're fine, but when you actually try and get them to write something down or do something, there's missing links. I think that's the major problem. It's the basic skills they lack, whether it's communication or basic Maths. (Kate, Foundation)

Much of the work was aimed at keeping them 'hanging in' and preventing them from returning to non-participation. While GNVQ was a way back into the educational system, 'typical' Foundation students started off with little commitment to learning. Kate believed that GNVQ was seen as better than going to work, and provided an opportunity to continue their social life:

> We have a problem with students coming en masse with friends and treating it as a social club and they're having a bit of a shock that it's not a social club. It's better than going to work isn't it. There's more interesting things in their social life to be getting on with, rather than thinking about going to work. (Kate, Foundation)

To Kate, 'they want to do a minimum amount of work or no work to get the qualification' and they definitely did not want it to appear as if they were doing any work:

> It's street cred as well, you can't be seen walking around with files. It's the image thing with a lot of these lads, they will not walk round with files. (Kate, Foundation)

Transforming these young people into learners was achieved by building students' confidence through the experience of success rather than failure. Once they began to succeed, their attendance and the quality of

their work improved:

> What they've actually achieved this year is very, very different to what they thought they could achieve. You see people putting their assignments together today and it's like, 'oh I am nearly there', rather than feeling that they've got miles to go. I think they'll be quite chuffed when they walk away with a Foundation. Now there's a lot saying 'oh yeah I'm going on to Intermediate', and that's nice, and I don't think they'd have ever thought that they might be going on to Intermediate at the beginning of the course. (Kate, Foundation)

However, as well as the stories of successful transformation, there were other students who did not respond to this approach, who Kate described as remaining difficult, and giving nothing back.

A culture of caring and helping the students

As in other departments, GNVQ meant hard work, for the teachers quite possibly more than for the students. The effort was felt to be worthwhile if it was reciprocated:

> I'll give a lot, but they've got to toe the line at the same time, so you meet in the middle. And if they don't turn up I'll get on the phone.
>
> I never let them fail, I'll just give it them back and give them pointers. So none of my students will ever fail, if they put a bit of work in. But then I'll have to go back, we'll sit down and do notes, we'll do it this way. (Kate, Foundation)

Kate's comment that she never let her students fail may seem out of place in GNVQ, but was perhaps quite accurate. Although the term 'fail' does

not appear in the GNVQ coursework assessment system (work is designated as not yet complete, and can be resubmitted), and she was not technically entitled to fail students' work, achieving a pass seemed to depend as much on the lecturer's hard work and commitment as it did on the student's.

Perceptions of GNVQ

Kate saw GNVQs as a way of getting students back into the system, by rebuilding their confidence as learners. She offered many examples of the transformation in young people's lives of which the following was just one:

> I've just seen three of the lads downstairs who were on Foundation last year. Break your neck nearly trying to get them through, but you see them walking around now, and they're sort of ten foot taller. (Kate, Foundation)

In this respect, she believed in the value of GNVQ, and said:

> It's a good grounding, they might shoot off now and go off onto a higher level. (Kate, Foundation)

However, there remained doubts about whether success at GNVQ Foundation offered a false promise for the future:

> With a lot of them, I don't know where they are going. I mean they'll all go on to Intermediate, but where they are going in their future, I wouldn't know. (Kate, Foundation)

The only way Foundation level could offer any worthwhile progression, was by leading on to more education rather than into employment. Yet for Kate, there were also doubts about the educational value of the qualification. GNVQ may have been 'getting kids back on the road', but it was ultimately a road to nowhere, if it had little value to employers:

> It's getting kids back on the road. I would say, for those who haven't achieved, it gives them a chance, it takes them back down to A-level where they can come out with a certificate that's an accredited certificate. What employers think that's another matter. (Kate, Foundation)

She expressed reservations about the assessment system:

> I'm not a hundred per cent sure whether I think it should be more on exams or more on course work. You've got students who are very, very poor at exams. I do feel with having a lot of course work they can actually achieve, it might take them a long time to get there, but they work incredibly hard, they always turn up to classes, their notes are always good, you know, so I'm not sure whether it should be more on exams or less on exams, it's very difficult to know. (Kate, Foundation)

Even though the coursework assessment system was an important factor in enabling Foundation students to succeed, Kate's doubts reflected how coursework assessment was in conflict with the examination culture of a traditional academic system. Her vision was a unified system:

> I wouldn't have A-Levels and I wouldn't have a GNVQ. I would have marry the two, and I think that would give you a good rounded qualification. Having someone who just

> does A-Levels or somebody who just does a GNVQ there are huge gaps. (Kate, Foundation)

The tensions and contradictions expressed in other departments were felt by Kate in Foundation Studies too. On the one hand, she perceived GNVQ as a welcome opportunity because it helped students to get back into learning. On the other, viewed in the wider frame of its value as a qualification, both in terms of its use value and exchange value, she had serious doubts.

Summary

This chapter has explored the perceptions of lecturers in four departments in Midlands College and considered factors which have affected cultures of teaching and learning. Both similarities and differences were found in the experience of lecturers in different departments. All the GNVQ students had been unsuccessful in some way in their previous education, and lecturers defined GNVQ as a second chance opportunity. GNVQs at Intermediate and Advanced levels were for students who had not succeeded in making the grade at GCSE. At Foundation level, GNVQs were a chance to bring young people back in from the periphery of participation in learning, many of whom may not have participated in the last two years of compulsory schooling for various reasons.

Students did not necessarily display high levels of motivation or dedication to this second chance opportunity. Their commitment to learning often remained at the level of what Macrae et al (1997) define as 'notional acceptance', though lecturers encouraged them to become more engaged and to move towards pragmatic acceptance through their GNVQ programme. Lecturers worked hard to encourage students who were perceived as 'acceptors', whether notional or pragmatic acceptors, to 'make the best of it' and complete their GNVQ successfully, and they were willing to dedicate enormous amounts of time to such students.

Some students appeared to show little sign of acceptance, and as 'hangers-in' seemed to use the college as a social meeting place, with little evidence of participation in formal learning requirements. The Foundation Studies Department expected to work with these students, and the task was seen as transforming such students into participants in learning. In Business Studies and Science, 'hangers-in' were only tolerated for a certain period of time. Lecturers encouraged students to become more committed to their studies, but if their efforts appeared to fail, measures were taken which effectively removed them from the mainstream learning environment. They were required to attend catch-up (or 'mop-up') classes, to repeat semesters, and as a last resort they were encouraged or asked to leave the course. In this way, lecturers maintained a sense of control and purpose to their work on GNVQs.

IT stood in contrast to these other departments. Although the students appeared to display similar behaviour to students elsewhere, they were perceived as hangers-in who did not seem to be going anywhere. What appeared to lie at the root of lecturers' very different perceptions was the impact of wider changes in the college, particularly the loss of control which was felt by lecturers as a result of the new Learning Development Centre.

The perception of GNVQ as a second chance qualification and perceptions of the students' orientations to learning affected how lecturers constructed what participation in GNVQ involved. The relationship between teachers and students appeared to be a collaborative effort to make the best of it, requiring a great deal of time and work on both sides. GNVQs appeared to require similar qualities of lecturers that it did of students. Commitment, flexibility and hard work were the hallmarks of the 'ideal' GNVQ lecturer. This was worthwhile if students achieved the credential which would enable them to progress within the education system. Nevertheless, there was a pragmatic recognition that GNVQs were perceived as second best by many, and lecturers had their own reservations about the qualification. However, commitment to the students led them to defend the students, and by implication GNVQs, against being defined as second rate: second chance yes, second best unfortunately, but second rate no.

Chapter 7

The Right Place for a Person Like Me:

Students' constructions of GNVQ

Introduction

The previous chapter explored lecturers' constructions of GNVQ, and highlighted the continuing strength of lecturers' orientations to students in their professional practice. This chapter examines students' perceptions of studying GNVQ at Midlands College, and discusses how they constructed a meaning for GNVQ which matched how they perceived their orientation to learning. The chapter reports on the students' perceptions and experience using the following headings:

Students' prior educational experience

Finding the right place to study

Finding the right course

Creating new and trusted ties with lecturers

A safer form of transition

Defining a suitable student for GNVQ

Vision and reality: students' knowledge of their own orientations to learning

The right sort of friends for learning

Imagined futures and the purpose of GNVQ

The students

Midlands College was located in an area with a large minority ethnic population, mainly from the Indian sub-continent, and since the GNVQ students were drawn from the local area, many of them were of minority ethnic origin (see table 6). The students included young people taking Intermediate and Advanced GNVQ in Business and Information Technology, students taking Advanced Science, and students taking Foundation level GNVQ. I initially anticipated considerable differences amongst students based on level and vocational area. However, there were strong similarities as well as differences in the data, and the chapter highlights these similarities, by considering all students together. This is not to suggest that all students are the same, but that students in this study were similar in the way they engaged in constructing GNVQ to suit their orientations to learning.

The college had developed its own particular niche, aimed at students who were considered to comply, whether notionally or strategically, with studying post-16. 'Hangers-in' were not encouraged to remain, and lecturers accepted a high attrition rate, to lose those students who displayed no sign of any commitment. The students I interviewed had all survived this unofficial sorting process at the college.

Table 6: GNVQ students interviewed at Midlands College

Name (All names are pseudo-nyms)	Gender and Ethnicity (self-reported)[1]	Current studies (GNVQ level plus other qualifications)	Previous academic qualifications (self-reported)	What they did before present course	Goals for the immediate future	Career goal	Family experience of level 3 qualifications and HE	Actual destination in following year (1998-1999)
Arshad	m Bangladeshi	Science Foundation	None In Bangladesh so did not sit GCSEs	In Bangladesh	Int GNVQ Science	Not decided, on hold for a year	None mentioned	Not known
Kadim	m Pakistani Muslim	Science Foundation	7 GCSEs grades D, E, F	In Pakistan	Int GNVQ, Adv GNVQ, university	Work with computers	None mentioned	Not known
Steven	m Caribbean	Science Foundation	8 GCSEs grades D, E, F	Y11 at school	Int GNVQ IT	Work with computers in a company	None mentioned. Older brother is a mechanic	Not known
Chris	m white British	Science Foundation	4 GCSEs 1xB, 1xD, 1xE, 1xG	Y11 at school	Int GNVQ Science, Adv GNVQ, university	Teaching	Aunt is a teacher	Not known
Darren	m African Caribbean	Leisure and Tourism Foundation	9 GCSEs grades D and E	Y11 at school	Int GNVQ Leisure and Tourism	On hold for a year, but wants to work for a company	Parents and sister did GNVQ equivalent	Not known

Name (All names are pseudo-nyms)	Gender and Ethnicity (self-reported)[1]	Current studies (GNVQ level plus other qualifications)	Previous academic qualifications (self-reported)	What they did before present course	Goals for the immediate future	Career goal	Family experience of level 3 qualifications and HE	Actual destination in following year (1998-1999)
Sharaz	m Pakistani Muslim	Leisure and Tourism Foundation	None Did not sit GCSEs	Y11 at school	Int GNVQ, Adv GNVQ, University	Set up own business, travel and tourism related	Cousin did A-levels, and now going to university Sister doing computing.	Not known
Susanne	f mixed race	Leisure and Tourism Foundation	7 GCSEs 3xE, 2xF, 2xG	Y11 at school	Intermediate GNVQ	Holiday resort rep	None mentioned	Not known
Ghalib	m Yemeni Muslim	IT Intermediate GCSE Maths retake GCSE Arabic	8 GCSEs 1xD, 6xE and F, 1xG	Y11 at school	Advanced GNVQ or A-levels University	IT engineer or programmer, return to Dubai or South Yemen	1st in immediate family. Cousins doing A-levels, uncle researching in IT at university	Not known
Sharon	f white British	IT Intermediate	none	Adult learner, various bits of work	Does not know Possibly interior design or IT-related	Seek employment	Others in family have achieved in education	Completed GNVQ Doing 2 year Beauty Therapy course at MC

Name (All names are pseudo-nyms)	Gender and Ethnicity (self-reported)[1]	Current studies (GNVQ level plus other qualifications)	Previous academic qualifications (self-reported)	What they did before present course	Goals for the immediate future	Career goal	Family experience of level 3 qualifications and HE	Actual destination in following year (1998-1999)
Carol	f white British	IT Intermediate	x? GCE O levels	Adult learner, various bits of work	HND	Teach IT in FE	Brother did HND	Completed GNVQ Feb 1999 Then HNC in IT and Computing at MC
Kiren	m Pakistani Muslim	IT Intermediate	7 GCSEs 1xC, 4xD, 2xE	Y11 at school	University (HND computer studies)	Job with computers Possibly run own business	Oldest. 1st to go to college	Adv GNVQ at MC
Kabir	m Pakistani	IT Advanced	x? GCSES 2xC + 1xC at retake	Int GNVQ IT, GCSE retakes at MC	Not university. Computer programming training course	Computer programmer	Father did BTEC National in Electronics	Not known
Julie	f white British	IT Advanced	8 GCSEs 1xB, 7xC	National Diploma in Animal Care at College I	Not sure. Would like to work with brother, perhaps university	Work with brother (who runs own IT business)	Brother has IT qualifications	Completed Adv GNVQ Customer assistant at Focus Do It All in Petworld Dept

Name (All names are pseudo-nyms)	Gender and Ethnicity (self-reported)[1]	Current studies (GNVQ level plus other qualifications)	Previous academic qualifications (self-reported)	What they did before present course	Goals for the immediate future	Career goal	Family experience of level 3 qualifications and HE	Actual destination in following year (1998-1999)
Kelly	f African-Caribbean mixed race	IT Advanced	3 GCSEs grade C Int GNVQ IT	Int GNVQ IT at MC	University (CAD systems)	Work with IT or join the army	Brother has IT qualifications, works in IT technical support service	University of Wolverhampton Computer Science Degree
Mark	m white British	Science Advanced	x? GCSEs grades E and F Int GNVQ Business	Int GNVQ Business at MC	Univeristy (Forensic science)	Does not know	None mentioned	Not known
Dawn	f white British	Science Advanced with A-level Human Biology and Chemistry	x? GCSEs all below C	Adv GNVQ Health and Social Care at College A	University (Forensic science)	Something medicine-related	Some family members doing science at university	Not known
Vicky	f white British	Science Advanced	7 GCSEs grades D or below Int GNVQ Health and Social Care	Int GNVQ Health and Social Care at College E	University Possibly medicine-related	Does not know yet	None	Not known

Name (All names are pseudo-nyms)	Gender and Ethnicity (self-reported)[1]	Current studies (GNVQ level plus other qualifications)	Previous academic qualifications (self-reported)	What they did before present course	Goals for the immediate future	Career goal	Family experience of level 3 qualifications and HE	Actual destination in following year (1998-1999)
Sunil	m Pakistani	Science Advanced with A-level Chemistry	Mostly Ds, 1xF, Biology retake grade C	GCSE retakes at MC	University (Biomedical sciences or biology)	No specific goal	Cousins have A-levels and have gone to university	Not known
Jane	f white British	Science Advanced	7 GCSEs 3xA-C, 3xD, 1xF	Y11 at school	Veterinary school	Veterinary nursing	Some family members at university	Not known
Shazia	f Indian Muslim	Science Advanced	8 GCSEs 1xC, 5xD/E, 2xG Int GNVQ Science	Int GNVQ Science at school	University (Pharmacology)	Pharmacology	Oldest in family. 1st to do GNVQ	Not known
Talib	m Pakistani Muslim	Science Advanced	5 GCSEs 3xC, 1xD, 1xE Int GNVQ Science	1. Int GNVQ Science 2. Started A-levels at school: had to drop out	University (Pharmaceutical sciences)	Pharmaceutical technician	1st to do GNVQ. Younger brother doing A-levels	Not known

Name (All names are pseudo-nyms)	Gender and Ethnicity (self-reported)[1]	Current studies (GNVQ level plus other qualifications)	Previous academic qualifications (self-reported)	What they did before present course	Goals for the immediate future	Career goal	Family experience of level 3 qualifications and HE	Actual destination in following year (1998-1999)
Imran	m Pakistani Muslim	Business Intermediate	5 GCSEs 2xF, 1xG, 2xU Fd GNVQ	Fd GNVQ for 2 years at MC	Adv GNVQ University	No idea	Oldest in family. 1st to do GNVQ	Did not complete GNVQ, continuing for 6 months Plans to attend a different college for Adv GNVQ
Kaesar	m Pakistani Muslim	Business Intermediate	8 GCSEs 3-4 x D	Y11 at school	Adv GNVQ Possibly university, or a 'good job'	Does not know. Possibly banking	1st to do GNVQ	Not known
Anil	m Pakistani Muslim	Business Intermediate	5 GCSEs grades D and E Fd GNVQ Science	1. C&G Electronics at College D (dropped out) 2. Fd GNVQ Business at MC	Adv GNVQ University	Has not thought about it yet	Oldest son. 1st in family to do GNVQ. Sister now doing GNVQ at College F	Not known
Tanzila	f Pakistani Muslim	Business Intermediate	8 GCSEs 3xC NVQ 2 in office admin	NVQ 2 Office administration at MC	Adv GNVQ Possibly university	Get a 'good' job (did not like work experience in office)	Older sister doing A-levels	Not known

Name (All names are pseudo-nyms)	Gender and Ethnicity (self-reported)[1]	Current studies (GNVQ level plus other qualifications)	Previous academic qualifications (self-reported)	What they did before present course	Goals for the immediate future	Career goal	Family experience of level 3 qualifications and HE	Actual destination in following year (1998-1999)
Sofia	f Pakistani Muslim	Business Intermediate	3 or 4 GCSEs	Y11 at school	Adv GNVQ HND at university	Does not know yet	Cousins and sister have done A-levels/GNVQ, and gone to university	Not known
Ansar	m Kashmiri Muslim	Business Intermediate	3 or 4 GCSEs	Fd GNVQ Business for 2 years at MC	Adv GNVQ University	Office job	None mentioned	Did not complete GNVQ Went to Pakistan, then took work as machine operator in local engineering firm
Baber	f Bengali Muslim	Business Advanced (MC)	6 GCSEs 2 x D plus 4 x C at retake	GCSE resits at College C	University	Administration	Sister did Adv GNVQ. Others in family have done A-levels	Not known
Wasim	m Pakistani Muslim	Business Advanced (MC)	4 GCSEs grades E, F, G C&G Electronics Int GNVQ	1. C&G Electronics at College D 2. Int Business GNVQ at College F	Possibly university if grades are sufficient or seek employment	Work in marketing and finance OR computer technician	1st in family to do GNVQ. Younger brother now doing GNVQ	Completed GNVQ in June 1999 Then HND Business and Finance at MC

Name (All names are pseudo-nyms)	Gender and Ethnicity (self-reported)[1]	Current studies (GNVQ level plus other qualifications)	Previous academic qualifications (self-reported)	What they did before present course	Goals for the immediate future	Career goal	Family experience of level 3 qualifications and HE	Actual destination in following year (1998-1999)
Waqas	m Pakistani Muslim	Business Advanced (MC)	1 GCSE English C&G levels 1 and 2 Fd GNVQ Bus Int GNVQ Bus	1. Bricklaying 2. Fd GNVQ at MC 3. Int GNVQ Bus at MC	University	Does not know	Parents had minimal education. Cousins of similar age, all at college	Not known
Sarbjit	f Indian Sikh	Business Advanced (MC)	Low grades at GCSE	Int GNVQ at MC	University	Run own business (club for 18-30)	'Most' of family have done A-levels, HNDs	Not known
Jasbinder	f Indian	Business Advanced with A-level Art (6th form centre)	10 GCSEs 4 x C	Y11 at school	University	Has not considered this yet	Parents went to school in India. Cousins at university, some took GNVQs	Not known
Saira	f Indian Muslim	Business Advanced (6th form centre)	10 GCSEs 1xB, 2xC Int GNVQ Bus	Int GNVQ at MC	University Degree in Business or Public Admin and Management	Work for a firm for 2 years then start own business	Brothers, uncles, aunts, cousins have degrees in optometry, dentistry, medicine	Coventry University Business Information Technology degree

Name (All names are pseudo-nyms)	Gender and Ethnicity (self-reported)[1]	Current studies (GNVQ level plus other qualifications)	Previous academic qualifications (self-reported)	What they did before present course	Goals for the immediate future	Career goal	Family experience of level 3 qualifications and HE	Actual destination in following year (1998-1999)
Munir	m Indian Muslim	Business Advanced (6th form centre)	12 GCSEs 5xC, 5xD, 1xE, 1xF	GCSE retakes at College G	University HND or degree in Business	Management	Father does not have higher qualifications. Uncles have A-levels and degrees	Not known
Paul	m Indian Hindu	Business Advanced (6th form centre)	8 GCSEs grades D and below Int GNVQ Engineering	Int GNVQ Engineering at College G	University Degree	No idea	Wider family have experience of A-levels	Not known
Jo	m African Caribbean	Business Advanced (6th form centre)	8 GCSEs 3xC, 4xD, 1xE OCN in Sound Production	Sound engineering at College H	University Degree in Business	Run a recording studio	None	University of Central England Business Studies degree

Name (All names are pseudo-nyms)	Gender and Ethnicity (self-reported)[1]	Current studies (GNVQ level plus other qualifications)	Previous academic qualifications (self-reported)	What they did before present course	Goals for the immediate future	Career goal	Family experience of level 3 qualifications and HE	Actual destination in following year (1998-1999)
Ajit	m Indian	Business Advanced (6th form centre)	9 GCSEs 3xC Modern Apprenticeship NVQ 2 motor vehicle Int GNVQ Science	Int Science at College B	University Degree in Business Management	Does not know yet	Father is a teacher. Sister took GNVQ	Not known
Sukjhit	m Indian Sikh	Business Advanced (6th form centre)	8 GCSEs 2xC, 6xD or below Int GNVQ Business	Int GNVQ at MC	University Degree	No idea	Family members have done A-levels	Not known

KEY Fd: Foundation GNVQ
Int: Intermediate GNVQ
Adv: Advanced GNVQ
?: student cannot recall
MC: Midlands College

1 Ethnicity includes religion where students defined themselves in this way
2 College A, B, C, D to I are different colleges in the Midlands. All except College I are local to the Midlands College area.

The table above provides a summary overview of the students interviewed for the study, with information about their achievement at 16, their GNVQ vocational area and level, their goals for the future, and their families' experience of education.

Studying GNVQ

Students' prior educational experience

As has been noted elsewhere (Gray, Jesson and Tranmer, 1993; Payne, 1998), achievement at 16 was an important factor in determining the route followed by students in this study. Not only was the academic pathway closed to them as a result of their GCSE grades, but the students' horizons for action were influenced by their previous educational experience. The experience of learning at school had undermined their confidence in their ability to study. Students had an overwhelming perception that there were forms of learning, embodied in academic qualifications with end-of-course examinations, that were too difficult for them, and which were to be avoided in the future.

For students who started at Foundation level, it was not just results at 16 that were an important factor, but the move from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4 at the age of fourteen which formed a crucial turning point. This was usually related to negative experiences of school, though personal

circumstances had held back some students' progress, such as Arshad (Foundation), who was in Bangladesh for most of years 10 and 11 and did not take GCSE exams.

Other students talked of falling behind, and becoming demotivated as the pressure increased. Waqas, who had worked his way from Foundation through to Advanced, described this as follows:

> I had real bad reading and writing problems in school in the first year to third year. From there it's not worth it then, is it. Your school life's gone, and then you have to do what you can, pick what you can. (Waqas, Advanced Business)

Susanne also identified the end of Key Stage 3 as a decisive moment in her learning career:

> I can't really explain why I didn't get on at school, I just know that some of the work we did was boring. Year 7 I was doing really well, getting As, Year 8, still doing alright. Coming to the end of Year 8, Year 9, that's when things just went wrong. I hated it there.

She described her perception of school:

> It was just madness. They just used to shout at us, like shut up, sit down. I didn't want to stay at school. I wanted to move on somewhere else, get away from the teachers and meet new people. They expected us to give them respect and they didn't really respect us. You'd try and say something to them and they'd be shouting at you before you'd even finished what you had to say, or sending you outside and shouting at you, saying "I'm the teacher, you listen to me" and, like, you've got something to say and they're not having it. I was forever going to my Head of Year complaining about stupid things. That got in the way.

> That was just more pressure that a teenager can do without, being forced to do this and that. Some people just grow up quicker than others, they've got a mind of their own more than others, and I think I was one of those people. (Susanne, Foundation)

Traumatic events had occurred in some young people's lives, which prevented them from following smooth academic career trajectories.

Talib (Advanced Science) had stayed on at school at 16 to take an Intermediate GNVQ, as a route into A-levels. He then started A-levels, but his studies came to a halt when his father died. He explained:

> My dad was not really happy when I couldn't get onto A-levels first time, but then he understood that I couldn't get to A-levels. So he told me to do Intermediate Science and when I finished that off and passed it he was quite happy. I started A-levels about four months before he passed away, and in that four months I reckon that I did make my dad happy. So, like, my dad did not pass away on a down note, he passed away on high note. This is my son doing A-levels, you know. (Talib, Advanced Science)

Even though it had been his own and his father's ambition that he should do A-levels, the academic route was too risky now that he was faced with additional responsibilities at home, and he chose GNVQ on his return to education, as a more assured way of achieving an Advanced level qualification.

Ghalib (Intermediate IT) moved to the UK from the Yemen when he was thirteen, as war broke out. He described how he had to flee the country:

> On the last day before I came here, there was no warning about the war or anything and it just started in the morning. There was no electricity the night before and the war just started the day after. I had to wake up my cousin, because we shared the same room, and all we could hear was rifles, you know, shootings, helicopters. We went under the stairs, in case anything happened. We left by plane the day after, 'cause me and my cousins and my parents had a British Passport. (Ghalib, Intermediate IT)

He had been successful at school in the Yemen, and had had some English medium education from the age of 12. The flight to England disrupted his progress. He went straight into Year Nine of secondary school on his arrival, so had only been in the country for three years when he took his GCSEs, and achieved E and F grades. GNVQ was his shortcut route to an Advanced level qualification, rather than retaking GCSEs.

Finding the right place to study

Students said that they chose Midlands College because it was local and the easiest college to reach by public transport. They also chose Midlands College on personal recommendation from friends and family. In a college survey asking students how they heard about the college, 98 per cent said from a friend or a member of the family (reported by Mike, Business Studies Curriculum leader). Mike described the students as follows:

> They're the cousins and friends of the people who came the year before. They will come in and one of the first things

> they'll say to you is "My name's such and such, my brother Sunil came here 5 years ago." That is a very common statement. (Mike, Business Studies Curriculum leader)

The students confirmed this. Wasim for example explained that he chose Midlands College on the recommendation of his cousin:

> I heard about this college from my cousin. He comes here, and he goes, "do Business Advanced", he goes "it's really good, the teachers are nice and all that". So I came here to do the course. (Wasim, Advanced Business)

Ten students had switched colleges to attend Midlands College since starting post-16 education (see table 6). The reasons why students said they moved colleges suggested that they saw the Midlands College environment as matching their orientation to learning. Some students said they moved to Midlands College, because they were not learning enough in their previous college (Anil, Intermediate Business; Ajit, Advanced Business; Munir, Advanced Business); other students said they changed colleges because they were being asked to work too hard (Wasim, Advanced Business; Paul, Advanced Business).

Finding a place to study, which fulfilled their image of the sort of learners they were - students who did not want to make too much effort with their studies - appeared to be a significant issue. Behind the decision to leave school, lay an implicit recognition that they were unlikely to gain respect or be treated as adults in school, unless they transformed their orientation

to learning and became much more committed to the formal requirements of studying, and become what Waqas (Advanced Business) termed 'boffins'.

Finding the right course

The ambivalent positioning of Foundation GNVQ was reflected in students' decision-making at 16. Only two of the seven Foundation students, Sharaz and Susanne, had actively sought out GNVQ as a means of putting right their previous educational failure. The other five students had not been active in their decision-making, and seemed to be doing the course by chance and because of lack of knowledge about anything else. Arshad for example did not know why he chose Science:

> Why Science? I don't know really, I just chose it somehow. (Arshad, Foundation)

Kadim planned to change from Science to IT at Intermediate level and only took Science because he was unaware of what opportunities were available:

> I didn't know there was IT at the start. I thought there was just Science and Business Studies. (Kadim, Foundation)

Darren was doing Foundation GNVQ because it was available at the college, even though it did not match his dreams of the future:

> I could have done a course with training kids to play football, or any form of sport. But it wasn't available at the college at the time, this college anyway, so I could always go on and do it somewhere else, but I'd rather stick with this now. (Darren, Foundation)

While he intimated that GNVQ was probably the wrong course, he preferred to stick with it through to Intermediate level, unwilling to risk the unknown by changing colleges and starting a new course, even though a change might better reflect his interests.

By contrast, for Sharaz, GNVQ was a chance to put right things which had started to go wrong at Key Stage 3:

> In the first year I was really trying to concentrate and it just kept getting harder and harder. By year 8, by the second year, you just think to yourself, it's just too much work in this much time you see, so you start getting behind from all the rest of the group. It looks like all the rest of the group is in front of you, you just fall back. You just lose concentration, you see. Your head just goes blank, and I told myself I couldn't do it no more.

By the time he took GCSEs at school, everything was moving 'too fast':

> I tried all my education and it's like everything was going too fast, you see, GCSEs, they were just coming too fast at me. But in this course, like, GNVQ it's slower and it helps you, you see at the Foundation level they take things slowly and that's the best thing about it, and you get to learn a lot. (Sharaz, Foundation)

GNVQ was seen as a means of starting again from scratch and wiping the slate clean. It was a way of taking things more slowly and removing the

pressure and strain associated with their previous experience of studying. Although the Foundation students all appeared to start out as 'hangers-in', with a tenuous commitment to learning, their behaviour changed during their GNVQ course. GNVQ offered a way of rebuilding confidence, while delaying decision-making about the future. Their increasing confidence related to the whole learning environment. As Sharaz explained, he felt that he fitted in to the college and was accepted:

> I like this college myself you see. The teachers are always calm and they're always taking things slowly and it's just the students and all that, it's nice and comfortable to be in, it's like home. (Sharaz, Foundation)

Amongst Foundation students, parents were proud that their daughter or son was attending college. Steven said: 'My mum, she's very pleased with all the work that I've completed so far.' Kadim's parents were pleased that he was going to college, though when asked if his family knew what GNVQ was, he replied 'doubt it'. Similarly, Chris's parents did not know what GNVQ was, but were proud that he was at college:

> They don't care really, it's just, I've come to college and that, they're really proud of me. (Chris, Foundation)

Their families had aspirations for them, expressed as the hope that doing a qualification would lead to better job chances in the future. Darren reported that his parents thought it was better to do a qualification rather than get a job straight from school:

> They think it's better than just going into normal work, it might lead to a different aspect of work in a higher place. (Darren, Foundation)

For Intermediate students GNVQ was a way of avoiding things they were not good at, such as examinations and essay-writing:

> I chose it because it's more assignments than exams, 'cause I'm not really good at exams. I, like, really panic and stress so I can't be able to concentrate properly. (Sofia, Intermediate Business)

> I'm not very good at these kind of big exams, like GCSEs, I didn't like them at all. I don't like a lot of writing. I prefer the modular work. (Kiren, Intermediate IT)

Kiren commented that GNVQ was less stress and less pressure, partly because it was not necessary to live up to the expectations people have of A-level students:

> With A-levels you got more pressure, people are expecting you to do well. With GNVQ people don't expect you to do good. Even though you do good, they don't put the pressure on you, like, you've got to pass, you've got to pass. (Kiren, Intermediate IT)

For Advanced students, GNVQ was perceived as a less risky route into university than A-levels. GNVQ was described as the easier option, and a place where students felt they could succeed. Saira explained:

> I think this is the easier way for me to get on to university than A-levels, 'cause with A-levels you have a downfall where you could fail automatically just by the end of year exam and that depends on everything that you've done

> during the two years, and with the GNVQ it's different. You have your modules that count for something and I thought I really definitely want to go on to university and found the route that accepts me was Advanced GNVQ. (Saira, Advanced Business)

Assessment through tests and coursework rather than examination was an important consideration:

> The tests sound easier to do than exams at A-level at the end of two years. (Dawn, Advanced Science)

> I took up GNVQ because I'm not an examination person. I don't like sitting exams and I find it hard to revise, so I'd rather split it up into tests and assignments, and that's what GNVQ's about. (Jo, Advanced Business)

Although the choice of vocational area partly related to 'hot knowledge' about job opportunities from family connections, choices also avoided risk-taking. Ajit (Advanced Business) and Kabir (Advanced IT) consciously moved away from areas they found too difficult:

> I wanted to do electronics or computing but I went to electronics, and I found that a bit hard, so I came back to computing which I was more interested in anyway. (Kabir, Advanced IT)

Ajit, who took Intermediate Science and then changed to Advanced Business said:

> At school I was good at Science, and I thought I can do it further, go on to do Science Advanced and go to Uni, but it's got harder for me, and that's why I didn't want to do it

> so I changed. I'm happy with Business, I want to do it. (Ajit, Advanced Business)

Julie (Advanced IT), who wanted to work with animals, and Jo (Advanced Business), who hoped to run a recording studio, had put their dreams of a future career on hold, and were taking GNVQ as a form of security in an unpredictable job world. Munir perceived GNVQ as allowing him more time to study compared with A-levels, and providing more opportunities to receive help with his study:

> With GNVQs you've got quite a long time to do the assignments really. You get help in lessons on the subjects, you can do the assignments in lessons, you can go up, you know, it's just more adaptable. 'A's like, it's more independent. All you've got to do is take down notes, you've got more pressure on you. So you have to go home, you have to get a certain amount done by a certain time. (Munir, Advanced Business)

Practical work was also seen as providing more time to understand the work:

> In Advanced Science, you make notes but then you do practicals as well. So you do like 50% of notes and you do 50% of practical and then it gives your brain more time to understand. (Talib, Advanced Science)

Whereas A-level was a qualification people had heard of, GNVQ had to be explained to people at home, as Dawn and Vicky described:

> My family don't really know about it [GNVQ] because my older brothers have left school and didn't do anything like that. So they just think "yeah, whatever you want to do, do

it". They know about it now, but like I say, they don't understand it, because I think it's a hard course to explain to someone. (Vicky, Advanced Science)

My parents? Do they know about the course? They do know I'm doing something in science but not exactly about the course. But they do know about the A-levels that I'm doing, they do know about that. (Dawn, Advanced Science)

For Intermediate and Advanced level students, there was often a parental aspiration for their son or daughter to continue to higher education. Wasim wanted to join a training scheme, but his parents were keen for him to continue in education:

> They wanted me to study first. They thought that education is, like, really good, and if I get a job when I'm really young, it is really bad. (Wasim, Advanced Business)

In some cases, there was experience in the family of higher education, as Sunil explained:

> It's the people in my family, really. They've all done their GCSEs at school, and they've done their A-levels and they've gone to University and all that, and they're doing sciences as well. And my parents are always complaining, "look at them, they've gone to university and why can't you? After all, they're your cousins." And they say "What example are you going to set your brothers and sisters?" So that really gets me going. (Sunil, Advanced Science)

Kabir (Advanced IT) made a similar comment:

> Higher education they want me to go into. My dad has been to higher education and he said he wants the best for me, he wants me to get a higher education to get a better thing. (Kabir, Advanced IT)

For other students, they were the first to aim for higher education. Jo (Advanced Business) explained:

> My grandfather's really happy for me to go to university. I'll be, like, one of the first. They never went to university and I got an older brother, he didn't really do anything. They've always told me, "get a job, get education". And now they can see I'm doing it, they're really happy with me. (Jo, Advanced Business)

Where parents had such aspirations, they tended to express reservations about GNVQ in comparison to A-levels, as Kiren (Intermediate IT) suggested:

> I think they'd have preferred it if I did A-levels. There's something about A-Levels, but as long as I'm doing well, they don't mind. (Kiren, Intermediate IT)

Ajit's father, who was a teacher, expressed the following view:

> Ajit: My dad's a teacher anyway so he knows what GNVQ and A-Levels are all about, but he don't approve of GNVQ. He thinks the right way is A-Levels to get to Uni, 'cause Unis are going to recommend more A-Levels. 'Cause if there was A-Level students and there was me, GNVQ, they'd rather pick the A-Level student than me, 'cause that's what Unis consider really. I think times are changing, but my dad thinks that GNVQ … he's not really keen on it.
>
> AMB: What did you say in response?
>
> Ajit: I don't know, I think GNVQ is fine, that's the way I want to do it, 'cause I can't do exams. I don't really say anything to my dad 'cause then he'll just talk back at me. (Ajit, Advanced Business)

Munir and Saira were also counselled against GNVQ by their families,

because of the prestige associated with A-levels, and because it was a safer choice for entry to university. Munir's family eventually supported his decision to take GNVQ and advised him:

> "If you feel comfortable with GNVQs more than As and you think it's too hard, then go for GNVQs." But they go "just don't mess up these few years 'cause you need merits and distinctions to get into uni." And they go "you have to work hard for that". (Munir, Advanced Business)

Saira's family made similar comments:

> They didn't know what GNVQ was and how you can get on to university, they thought that it's like a training course, part-time training course and "she'll get a job or something" and so they were really, like, "oh no, don't do that. Re-sit your GCSEs and then do A-levels". But then I found out more about it and I tried to explain it to them. My dad goes, "do it if you think you'll be happy with it". (Saira, Advanced Business)

However, their families did not always have the experience or knowledge to provide specific help with studying or making decisions about the future. Often students had to work their future out for themselves, as Vicky explained:

> Sometimes I talk to mum about what am I going to do when I leave, but she says that it's got to be on my back and nobody else's. (Vicky, Advanced Science)

Mark explained that his family could not help him with his work, because they did not know about Science:

AMB: So what about your family at home, what do they think about you doing GNVQ? Do they know what it is.

Mark: I don't think so, no.

AMB: You told them?

Mark: I told them, some of the work that we do, they sort of don't really know a lot about Science so it's quite difficult, you know, if I struggle with my work they don't know what it is, unless I explain. (Mark, Advanced Science)

Creating new and trusted ties with lecturers

An important strength for students of studying at Midlands College was their relationship with teachers. Seeking out a place where a 'notional complier', who was not a 'boffin', was treated with respect and as an adult by teachers, was one of the reasons why students chose to go to Midlands College. The relationship with teachers increased in significance once on course. All students described how important relationships with teachers were to them. College lecturers they trusted, provided a new source of 'hot knowledge'. They provided information, which students could not get from their community, friends and family, where few people had knowledge or experience of GNVQ. Teachers were relied upon to help them through the system, both in terms of career decision-making, and in helping them with their work. Dawn, for example, when asked about how she would make decisions about the future, said:

> I'll talk to the lecturers because they help you quite a lot. (Dawn, Advanced Science)

For concrete advice about what he should do, Sunil (Advanced Science) turned to his chemistry teacher, who had recommended that he take an AS or an A-level alongside his GNVQ.

Trust had developed in a number of ways in Midlands College. It involved a balance of lecturers helping students, without putting too much pressure on them. Susanne (Foundation) defined a good GNVQ teacher as someone who related to the students:

AMB: So what makes a good GNVQ teacher?

Sus: Just providing good information to go with the course and just being normal, like just helping you with your work, letting you get on with it really, I think.

AMB: So what's being normal?

Sus: I know. What's being normal? Like not laying down the law too much, like stressing us out, like big deadlines, stuff like that. Even though we have got to have them, like if we get the work done properly before the deadlines, it just helps us get through it really.

Darren (Foundation) talked about whether school teachers could be good GNVQ teachers:

> They couldn't really adjust to it so quick. It's more calm being a tutor in a college. School teachers have deadlines more than anything, college ones do as well but it's more, everything has got to be done in school. (Darren, Foundation)

A recurring theme in what they said was that teachers 'helped' them.

Where school teachers demanded that pupils conform to the system, lecturers in college appeared to almost collude with students to meet the requirements of the system. In return for the help they received, they talked about helping the lecturers almost as if it was their side of the bargain. There appeared to be an unwritten agreement or alliance between lecturers and students to help each other to meet the requirements of the system. Chris explained this:

Chris: Well the teachers are nicer here anyway.

AMB: What does that mean?

Chris: Well, they give you more help with the work, tell you about the work when you're doing it, stuff like that, so it helps us out. And it helps them out because we complete the work on time then you see. And we get respect as well from the teachers.

AMB: Do you think you didn't before?

Chris: No.

AMB: What's that like in terms of you get respect now and you didn't before?

Chris: It's better, because we can help the teachers out. What I just said, with the work. 'Cause they give us respect so we give them back. (Chris, Foundation)

In return for help and respect from lecturers, the students, albeit somewhat reluctantly, completed the required work, and tolerated the bits they did not understand and could not see the point in. Thus Darren (Foundation) explained that he could not really understand how customer service applied to a wide range of employment areas, and finally said 'you just have to bear with it.'

Despite what they said about teachers not putting pressure on them at college, Steven (Foundation) was pleased that his tutor was strict about timekeeping and set deadlines, for the students relied on lecturers to make sure that they completed their work:

> AMB: Kate [the teacher] has told me that she's actually quite tough, you know that she expects you to do your work, she expects you to be on time and things like that.
>
> Steven: Yeah, that's good 'cause you get most work completed when someone's on your back and you do it, you will do the work, instead of being laid back and not getting any of it done.

For Intermediate students, as with Foundation, what made a good teacher was someone who helped you:

> A good teacher is always there, respects you, and doesn't shout, you know what you're doing and you've just got to tell the teacher how you're scheduling your stuff and how you're doing with the work and the teacher needs to ask if you need any help. That's a good teacher. (Imran, Intermediate Business)

> She's just there to help you, like Julia [Business Studies lecturer], she's there with us all the way through. (Tanzila, Intermediate Business)

A good lecturer needed to be both lenient and 'strict', and achieve a balance between the two:

> A good teacher helps you a lot, helps you if you need help. Or if you need to give in assignments a bit late, she's says yeah alright. Those sort of things. Like backing you all the way. (Kaesar, Intermediate Business)

A good lecturer had to avoid putting too much pressure on students:

> Some teachers just make you learn. It's learn, it's work, work, work through the lesson. We have two hour lessons. Half way through the lesson, especially when they're two hours, you get really bored, you stop paying attention. With most of the teachers we've got here we work, but they also give us breaks in between, let us stop for a few minutes, let us talk for a few minutes, it takes our mind off the work, then we pay attention for longer. (Kiren, Intermediate IT)

Students often preferred to work in college rather than at home, because they could get help from teachers:

> It's more helpful at college because you've got your own quiet area and you've got the library, so if you are stuck on anything you can just get up and ask. (Anil, Intermediate Business)

As Kiren admitted, he depended on teachers to manage his learning for him:

> AMB: Do you need the teachers to get you organised, would you get on with it?
>
> Kiren: No, I need the teachers to get organised, I'm not very organised. (Kiren, Intermediate IT)

Advanced students also saw teachers as helping, supplying information, and having time for them, but not putting too much pressure on them. Wasim, who did Intermediate GNVQ Business at another college (College F), and began Advanced there, switched colleges because:

> I got left behind. The teachers give us too much pressure and all that, exams and too many assignments. Then I got behind in that, and then I heard about this college from my friend. (Wasim, Advanced Business)

Wasim said that lecturers at Midlands College did not put pressure on students and they made learning fun:

> Our teachers are nice, like they don't like give you all the pressure and they tend to relax, and they're fun, they have fun in class, they have a laugh and a joke. (Wasim, Advanced Business)

Baber and Sarbjit described the strength of the ties they had formed with lecturers. They felt that teachers were concerned about them as individuals, and that they could depend on them in the long term:

> Baber: In the other college, if we did this course, they wouldn't help you that much. In this college, the teachers are always there for you and if you need any help you know you could go down to ask them.
>
> Sarbjit: Because they even say to us now, "oh, if you're doing an HND you can always come back to us and because we know you, we will help you out, if you think you need it". It counts for a lot at the end of the day, because you think, "oh that's good, if I'm struggling, at least I've got someone I can ask and contact at the end of the day".

The significance of building up trust with particular teachers was apparent from Jo:

> Now it's getting deeper into the course I'm finding disadvantages and parts I dislike about it. Like changes in teachers. I would have really liked to stick to the teachers I had at the start, but we've had a couple of changes. I had an understanding with the one before, I knew how they

> worked, but now I'm changing and the assignments are getting harder and it's getting a bit more pressure on me now and I feel like I won't achieve the same grades or I'm not putting in the same effort I was at the start. Hopefully when we come back in September I'm going to be fresh again, cause I'll have had a holiday and I'm going to be all right in the course again. (Jo, Advanced Business)

Saira voiced a similar need to have the right sort of teacher. Other teachers might not be 'proper teachers', and therefore unsuitable for GNVQ:

> I think next year they are going to get some of the A-level teachers to teach us and they don't know anything about GNVQ. They don't know nothing about GNVQ like the proper teachers, and I'm concerned because it's my life here and they're not going to teach us properly and we're not going to be able to get our grades, and that's why I'm sort of scared at that. I'm not saying they can't do it. But I think they should at least go to some, you know, get themselves educated into the GNVQ system a bit more. They're going to get these teachers from the site to teach us now, and I think they are more into just the A-level. (Saira, Advanced Business)

The trust relationship was quite fragile. The students taking Advanced IT indicated what happened when trust broke down and students felt they were not helped and supported by teachers. Compared with being 'brilliant when I first got here', Kelly and Julie now had strong criticisms of the arrangements for teaching and learning. At a superficial level this referred to access to computers. However, beneath this there was a more fundamental issue about relationships with teachers and the nature of the learning environment. With experience of both current and previous

arrangements in the IT department (all teaching was moved into the Learning Development Centre at the beginning of the academic year during which the fieldwork took place), Advanced students were very aware of how it was now impossible for lecturers to supervise the students' work as closely as they had in the past. They felt that they no longer got the sort of help they needed. Kabir explained:

> Kabir: Last year it was just like the computers in one room, you know what time you're going to the lesson, you go straight to the lesson, the teachers are there and you just do your assignments in the lesson. Well this year you get more days off, you get more assignments and you don't get to use the PCs when you're at college. And only in your free time you're supposed to do the assignment and you get about a week to do your assignment. Then if it's late you just don't get marks. It's harder for us, you don't get to learn much or anything 'cause last year if you got stuck you had to ask the teacher - the teacher's there but if you get stuck now there's nobody to ask. (Kabir, Advanced IT)

Advanced IT students felt that their lecturers did not display the same commitment to them as previously:

> The times of the lessons have been changing every week. You don't know what lesson you're going to unless you just call and ask the teachers all the time. (Kabir, Advanced IT)

> The teachers don't seem to be that bothered really, they're always changing the routines and stuff, and half the time you get your assignments and sometimes they still can't decide when the hand-in date is. (Kelly, Advanced IT)

> They don't bother putting it [the assignment deadline] on any more do they, because no-one gets them in on time. (Julie, Advanced IT)

As Julie's comment suggested, there was a breakdown in the unwritten bargain, whereby lecturers helped the students, and in return, students helped the lecturers, by completing their work. The students' willingness to complete work, including the key skills and monitoring requirements of GNVQ, depended on their perception of whether they were being helped by their lecturers, and were therefore willing to help the lecturers in return. Julie astutely observed that it was a matter of staff-student relationships:

> Kelly: Some lessons you just think, like communications, I just can't see the point of it at all.
>
> Julie: I reckon that's all staff-student relationship. The amount of people that don't bother coming in for it. I don't bother coming in for the first lesson sometimes, not 'cause it's too early, 'cause school was always too early. It's all right if we've got a teacher that teaches us instead of just having a go at us every five minutes because someone laughs. There is no relationship, they've got no respect. Well OK, we've got respect for a lot of teachers, but a couple, we'll just run over them 'cause they let us. I know we shouldn't do it, we're supposed to be old enough to know better. (Julie and Kelly, Advanced IT)

They wanted teachers to take responsibility for managing their learning, for they did not seem any better at managing their studies and keeping to deadlines for their assignment work than Foundation and Intermediate students. Yet this required an almost intangibly fine balance between being 'rigid' (Julie) and 'more harsh about hand-in dates' (Kelly), while not treating them like school pupils. So, unexpectedly, the removal of internet access from most of the computers was welcomed by Julie:

> I've got to say this right, I'm glad they've only put the Internet on the first two lines, 'cause otherwise, you're near the computers and you do a bit of work and then, damn, damn, Internet, bring it up, put it down, bring it up, put it down. And if someone walks past, you put it down and feel guilty and start typing. I'm glad they've done that now, so you can't do that anymore. (Julie, Advanced IT)

A safer form of transition

GNVQ offered students a more assured route to achievement, by providing a pathway through the levels in the qualifications system starting from level one. A number of students had avoided risk-taking by starting at a lower level of GNVQ if they were on the borderline between two levels (for example, Sofia, Imran, Anil and Tanzila, Business Intermediate; Kelly, IT Advanced), so that they could start again from the beginning (Imran, Business), and take things step by step (Sofia, Business).

Easing the pressure in this way meant that, at all levels of GNVQ, the students in this study took considerably longer than officially assumed to make progress up the qualifications ladder. Although it was possible to commence a two-year Advanced GNVQ programme straight after GCSEs, only one of the students (Jane, Advanced Science) in this study was doing so. Even if their transitions had followed a smooth pattern of progression through the levels of GNVQ, it would have taken three years to achieve a level three Advanced GNVQ qualification starting at

Intermediate level, or four years starting at Foundation level.

However, instead of making continuous progress upwards, the students' career paths in this study bore hallmarks of what Evans, Behrens and Kaluza (2000) refer to as broken transitions. They took longer than the scheduled timescale to complete courses, they repeated years, and they moved around courses for various reasons. Several students had spent a year doing GCSE retakes (for example, Sunil, Advanced Science; Munir and Baber, Advanced Business). Jo (Advanced Business) completed a course in Sound Engineering, and then moved to Advanced GNVQ, because he wanted a back-up in case his ambition to run a recording studio failed. Julie (Advanced IT) had done a National Diploma in Animal Care, but decided that there were insufficient job opportunities in that field, and switched to IT. Dawn (Advanced Science) had completed an Advanced GNVQ in Health and Social Care, and decided that she liked the science element and therefore moved to Science GNVQ.

Defining a suitable student for GNVQ

Students were aware of how GNVQ was perceived in the world at large, by friends, family and universities:

Baber: Most of them think, when they hear that you're doing GNVQ, they go "GNVQ!" It's like, they think …

Sarbjit: They think, if you do A-level, people go "that's really good", and if you do GNVQ, they go, "what's that all

about?" That sort of thing. (Baber and Sarbjit, Advanced Business)

AMB: Are there bad things about GNVQ?

Ajit: It's just how it's rated in the public eye, it's like GNVQ, from a teacher's point of view, Uni people, like Uni lecturers, they don't really approve of GNVQ, they think the A-Level way is the proper way to go about it. (Ajit, Advanced Business)

Kabir: It's like if somebody's got a GNVQ and an A-level, the one with the A-level would be accepted more, it's like the universities will want three A-levels but the GNVQs are equivalent to two A-levels. That's only if you get a distinction or merit, but if you get a pass then that's nothing. (Kabir, Advanced IT)

The sort of learner suited to GNVQ was described by students as someone who did not match up to the requirements of academic study. GNVQ students were students who had not got good grades, who were not good at exams, and who were not capable of doing A-levels. Steven (Foundation) said:

> I reckon it's good for everyone that hasn't done so well in their GCSE exams. I would recommend it to them. (Steven, Foundation)

Kadim (Foundation) confirmed this view:

AMB: Is it suited to a particular way of learning do you think?

Kadim: Person who has less grades, it's suited for them.

AMB: And why is it suited to them, do you think?

Kadim: 'Cause it can get their grades higher then. (Kadim, Foundation)

To succeed with GNVQ required hard work. Darren and Susanne

(Foundation) explained:

> You have to be really mentally activated and you've got to want to do it, you can't be here to waste time, 'cause you're just going to be wasting a year of effort. There's no point in sitting around. You may as well do it, you've got to do it, if you want to do something. (Darren, Foundation)

> They need to be dedicated to their work. They need to know what they want to do, 'cause there's no point in doing the course, GNVQ anyway, if you're just not going to do it really. (Susanne, Foundation)

Intermediate and Advanced students expressed similar views. Sofia

(Intermediate Business) explained that:

> Sofia: I think anybody can do GNVQ. Like for A-levels you've got to be smart, you've got to have good grades. You've got to study the whole year through, but with GNVQ you have to study, you have to study wherever you go, school whatever. But I think anybody can do GNVQ.
>
> AMB: Whereas anybody couldn't do A-level?
>
> Sofia: I don't think everybody can do A-level, I can't do A-levels, I don't think I can anyway.
>
> AMB: But you can do GNVQ Advanced? Why's that?
>
> Sofia: Because A-levels is like, you've got three, four subjects in A-levels, for example if you choose English, but with Business it's just one subject and you just concentrate on one subject and your mind's not everywhere. With A-levels one minute your mind's on Maths, the next lesson is English, so it all gets mixed up. With Advanced GNVQ, it's just like one subject, Business. It doesn't matter what units they are, they still include business, so you can just concentrate on business and you don't need to think about any other subject. (Sofia, Intermediate Business)

Waqas (Advanced Business) said he would recommend GNVQ to 'People

like me, who didn't do so well in exams'. Jo (Advanced Business) said that GNVQ was suited to:

> Someone who doesn't really like to sit exams, doesn't like to revise ... they're not really good at paying attention in lessons, like meaning you can miss a lesson and always catch up. You can do that with A-levels, but there is a certain part in A-levels, where you'd be in a lesson, if you didn't pay attention, if you didn't know it, you didn't have the notes in your book, another book's not going to teach you the way your teacher told you. (Jo, Advanced Business)

When asked whether they would recommend GNVQ to others, the following comments were made by Advanced students:

> I'm already recommending my cousins, 'cause they are going to college this year and I go to them, "if your grades are not too good at school, then you might as well do GNVQ". I go "it's a good thing to do". But, for example, if she gets 5 As and 4 Bs or something then I go "you might as well do A-level, but otherwise do GNVQ". (Munir, Advanced Business)

> If they like exams then I recommend they should go for A-Levels, if they're not keen on exams, they should go for GNVQ route. Depends on the person, doesn't it. (Ajit, Advanced Business)

> If there was someone that I knew in my family or somebody that's finding GCSEs easy and he's got enough GCSEs to do A-levels, then I'd advise him to do A-levels. But if they've messed their GCSEs up, I'd tell them to do GNVQ. I'd explain to them that it's much easier. (Sunil, Advanced Science)

Ghalib and Kiren's views (Intermediate IT) about what made a good student were:

> Study hard. That's what my dad says. You study hard, you don't mess about in the lessons or outside. (Ghalib, Intermediate IT)

> As long you work and finish the whole course, then anyone can do GNVQ. (Kiren, Intermediate IT)

Advanced students identified similar qualities in a good GNVQ student. Jane (Advanced Science) said she would recommend it to people:

> if they're strong willed. If they're lazy then no, because you've got to do a lot of work on your own. If you need to be guided, then no.

Talib (Advanced Science) talked of having to keep focused:

> If you come focused to your lesson, every single lesson, it doesn't matter if you like your lesson or don't like it, you always come focused, do your work so it keeps you happy, keeps your teacher happy. (Talib, Advanced Science)

Sarbjit (Advanced Business) explained that anyone could succeed with GNVQ if they concentrated and wanted to study:

> You have to concentrate, because assignments are really research-based and you have to get everything at the beginning because you have to put all the information into the assignment. So you just have to really have a head on your shoulder and want to study. (Sarbjit, Advanced Business)

Thus, to succeed with GNVQ, it was apparently not necessary to be smart or clever. The qualities a good GNVQ student needed were dedication and hard work, and the willingness to make an effort. Nevertheless,

Waqas had a vision of the perfect GNVQ student, who could achieve the outcomes, who could get their work done, but who was able to have friends, and be cool, all at the same time:

> A good student is a person, like, I shouldn't say his name, he's in our class. He can chill out, he can mess about but he'll still get a distinction grade assignment. I don't know how. That's his secret, he won't tell us. I think he's got mates from outside who go "yeah mate you do it like it this". And then he just gets a book, copies it, or does his own words and they tell him how to lay it out. I think it's that, because he knows a lot of people, like he works in the Royal Mail, he wears all the designer wear and he's not that bad-looking. And he goes with girls and all this, and I think the girls and the boys, his mates, help him out. (Waqas, Advanced Business)

This seemingly inexplicable ability to sail through the course was not typical for students in this study. They needed to make considerable effort to succeed with their studies.

Vision and reality: students' knowledge of their own orientations to learning

> Come in say June, 1st June, you'll see all of them in the library, just coming to the desks, and trying to do their work, trying to tell the next man, "here man I'm trying to write" or grabbing every chair. Teachers go, "The rush is in. The rush is in!" And no-one's done their assignment this year, not even one! (Waqas, Advanced Business)

Although the students could describe what made a good GNVQ student, as Waqas's comment above suggested, they did not necessarily match up to the image they portrayed. The hard work they described as essential

for a good GNVQ student, did not fit with the level of effort they managed to invest in studying. Although students stressed the need to keep up with work, and get work completed, they explained how they themselves did not succeed in doing so. Sofia explained:

> With assignments, we usually get it about four or five months before, and we always say to ourselves we're going to finish it before. But when the last minute comes we're like, "there, quickly, everyone". Like yesterday, the computer room was just full. Everyone was just doing their assignments. We always leave it to the last minute. (Sofia, Intermediate Business)

Kiren described what he would like to do differently:

> Probably do my assignments a bit quicker. Not leave it to the last minute. (Kiren, Intermediate IT)

Advanced students reported similar problems with managing their studying and completing work:

> I tend to leave it more towards the last minute. And that isn't right, because then I think, "oh god, I'm doing it all at the last minute, it's not good really". I know I'm not doing it to the best of my ability, I know I can do better, if I'd, like, taken more time and that. But I still keep leaving it. (Jasbinder, Advanced Business)

It appeared to be difficult to break out of the mould of losing time by not keeping up, or not achieving at a suitable level to make a smooth transition to the next stage of formal education. It was a feature of their prior educational experience, and although it was something students

regretted, it continued to be a problem:

> If I could go back in time, I would change my school life. I'd somehow try to study more, get a better result, get through college, and don't mess about the first year. If I could change the mess about, I could have finished the first year and gone into the next year and no worries, like saying "oh god next semester to do". That's what I'd change mainly. (Waqas, Advanced Business)

> There's only one thing I regret. If I work more hard in my GCSEs and got about five GCSEs I could have probably done my A-levels. I don't know if I would have passed them or anything but if I did then I could have been in university now or something. (Talib, Advanced Science)

> I'd change my GCSE grades and I'd have done A-Levels or GNVQ higher level, National level straight away. And then I would have gone to uni probably, and then I would have been in a higher position than this. (Wasim, Advanced Business)

> When I was doing my GCSEs I lagged behind and everything. That's why I didn't get such good grades and I says, "well I'm gonna actually keep on top of this". (Vicky, Advanced Science)

AMB: Have you actually managed to keep up?

Mark: This year, yeah. Last year I didn't. That's why I'm repeating the year again. I think if I'd have worked as hard last year as I did this year I could have gone into the second year. (Mark, Advanced Science)

The right sort of friends for learning

Friends were not necessarily the right sort of people to study with. Carol, a mature student taking Intermediate IT, gave her perception of the younger students:

> They just come to pass the time of day I think, some of them. They come here to have a meeting with their friends, that's it. "Let's go for it, we'll all have a meeting, chat and sit around the canteen all day. Don't worry about going to lessons. What's lessons?" (Carol, Intermediate IT)

Imran (Intermediate Business) described students in his first year at the college as 'dossers', with whom he readily joined in doing little or no work. Some students had deliberately chosen Midlands College to get away from friends like this. Kiren (Intermediate IT), for example, said:

> It's pretty far away from my school, and none of my friends came here. Work better without my friends from school and everything. (Kiren, Intermediate IT)

Friends could be both a help and a hindrance. Chris and Arshad (Foundation) discussed this dilemma:

Arshad: When you're talking there with your friends and everything, you don't get on with the work actually.

Chris: Yeah, but as long as you're working together like instead of talking about different things.

Arshad: Yeah, then it's all right.

Chris: If you're talking about the work then you're getting on.

Arshad: If you're talking about the work it's all right.

Chris: But sometimes it is OK to work on your own, 'cause it's a lot quieter and you can work a lot quicker then if you know what you're doing.

AMB: Yeah. So you have to have friends that are actually on task and working along with you?

Chris: Yeah

Arshad: Your back up.

Chris: Back up.

Intermediate students explained that working with friends could be helpful:

> I work as a group with friends and stuff. I make sure I know what I'm doing and then I've got to tell them what they have to do and we work as a team.
>
> Most of the time when we do assignments we actually work together, like give each other ideas and everything, because we finish it off quicker and it's a lot easier like that. It's weird on your own because you've got no-one to, you know, that's why I just do about an hour at home, because I prefer working in college. (Kiren, Intermediate IT)

Yet there remained the constant danger that other students could be a distraction, rather than a help:

> I work in the computer room downstairs. I work in the library and I work at home. I usually take the books home, because using college, when there's so many people about and they come and talk to you and everything, you can't get any work done. (Sofia, Intermediate Business)

Friends could contribute to failure. Imran found during his first year that social friends were not necessarily the right sort of friends for studying in college. He described the problem as being with too many Asians (like himself), which for him meant being with young people who did not want to learn:

> Imran: First year when I came there was too much students and I couldn't learn nothing, and then I failed the first year. There was too many dossers. Second year, what happened was, only a few people came here. In the first year, there was too many Asians, and once you're with Asians you can't learn nothing.
>
> AMB: What do you mean by that?

Imran: I mean they're talking. I mean, like, if a teacher's talking and explaining things and if I'm sitting there, I've got to try to understand what she's trying to say to me. But the other people would be talking, you know, their own stories, and the person can't learn nothing.

Other students offered concrete evidence that being Asian was not synonymous with being a 'dosser', and indeed Imran admitted that 'some Asians' had started to get down to work. However, he was still considering going to another college for Advanced GNVQ, because:

> I would start to know new people and I'd get on with them. I mean down there you see a group of youngsters and they says, "how are you doing with the work?" And the work they do, they just copy. If you go somewhere different, no-one will know you and you won't know them and you've got to work in a fresh way. (Imran, Intermediate Business)

Advanced students described the same dilemma. Munir had changed colleges because he was not getting on with his work:

> I felt that I needed a change 'cause at [College G] I wasn't getting my work done, 'cause I had too many friends and I thought "might as well go away from it", and came here, just by myself. (Munir, Advanced Business)

They also took work home to get away from the distraction of friends:

Sarbjit: I don't know why, but if I'm at college I can't do my work at college, it's just like when I get home I can concentrate.

Baber: You know you've got everything there. At home I can study, but at college I can't, because I think at home it's easier and you can concentrate in one room and you just think about your work. And in college you see people coming in, out, in libraries I could never study. When I go

in the library, I just take books, information and go home and do my work. (Advanced Business)

I find it easier to work at home, no-one in. If I go in college I'll be in there for about half an hour, come back down, spend half an hour with my mates, go back and it doesn't usually work, you know. There's no one at home you see, I'm there by myself. (Munir, Advanced Business)

Yet there were disadvantages to working at home. It was a higher risk strategy, with no-one available to help, whereas in college:

> You get to speak to each other about finding out, it's like teaching each other, isn't it. Say if he's stuck on it, I can explain to him, then I'm learning more, because we've all got the same assignments. (Jasbinder, Advanced Business)

Imagined futures and the purpose of GNVQ

The most important purpose of GNVQ for students was achieving outcomes and passing exams. Chris and Darren's comments (Foundation) stressed the importance of this:

> Passed quite a few exams since I've been here. Done better than what I have done at school. I'm doing quite well. (Chris, Foundation)

AMB: Have you had to do end of unit tests?

Darren: Yeah. Passed all of them [sounds surprised]. Found that OK as well, Foundation, then just next year it's going to be the Intermediate. Should find it OK as well. If I get the right help. I'm not behind or nothing. (Darren, Foundation)

For Ghalib (Intermediate IT), successful outcomes were of primary importance:

AMB: If you had to describe to your mother what you're getting out of GNVQ, what would you say to her?

Ghalib: Distinctions. I'd say that I've passed all the exams. (Ghalib, Intermediate IT)

At Advanced level, Julie (Advanced IT) said that what she was getting out of GNVQ was 'hopefully the certificate' and Vicky explained:

> If you come out with a distinction it's a 'B' grade of A-level, so it's a good grade. (Vicky, Advanced Science)

Progressing through the levels of GNVQ, achieving Advanced, and entering higher education, was what the majority of students aspired towards. This concurs with work by Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997), who found that students used GNVQ as a gradual progression to get them back on track and into university eventually. Both students and lecturers at Midlands College recognised that only Advanced GNVQ had any real exchange value outside the college. As Kadim (Foundation) said 'You have to do at least Advanced to get a good job.'

Transition beyond education remained part of a rather vague future for most students, with GNVQ seen as a means of obtaining a 'good job' with 'better pay'. Amongst Foundation students, there did not seem to be any knowledge about the employment they had in mind, and only Susanne had investigated a future progression route. Yet although a future job remained a distant prospect for most of them, they believed that

credentials would help them to succeed. As Chris said: 'It's better to get a qualification before you go out to work.' They all wanted to go on to Intermediate GNVQ, aware that GNVQ Foundation only had value as a stepping stone to the next level of qualifications. Beyond that, their responses were more vague:

> You get a qualification at the end of it as well, a couple of certificates that say I'm fully science and maths and that. Which they send through the post so if you ever wanted to go for a job, just show them to your employer that you've got the qualification to do whatever. (Chris, Foundation)

The career goals of Intermediate students tended to be no more specific than Foundation students. They were hoping for a 'good job', a job 'with a company' and 'proper pay'. Imran and Kiren's comments exemplified this:

> With Business you can get a good job like insurance companies or different types of job. With the GNVQ you get proper pay, you have qualifications. (Imran, Intermediate Business)

> I just wanted to carry on in education. I want to get a good job at the end, I really want to get into a job with computers and most jobs in computers you need qualifications, it's best if you get the qualification. (Kiren, Intermediate IT)

Doing GNVQ meant for Imran (Intermediate Business) that 'At least at the end of the day I'd be more qualified'.

Sofia was cautious about what the future beyond GNVQ would hold:

> I don't know what it's going to be after that, not yet. Let me get to university first. I don't think ahead that much. I let it go step by step, like I have done Intermediate now, I decided just recently I'm going to go on to Advanced, and when I finish Advanced in two years then I'm gonna think if I go to university or not. (Sofia, Intermediate Business)

Almost all Advanced students were aiming for university, which was the motivating vision. Paul (Advanced Business) said: 'I know I have to go to Uni, so I'm working towards that.' Sunil wanted a degree because:

> It's just a qualification that I want to have, you know, that I've been to university. And it's just that, you get a job sometimes and it says that if you've got a degree you'll get paid more. There's more varieties of better jobs. Whereas if you haven't been to university and you haven't really got a degree, there's less chance of you getting a good job.
>
> I just feel that if you've done science or if you've got a science qualification you can sort of get into almost anything really. (Sunil, Advanced Science)

However, for Wasim, a sense of lost time affected his imagined future. He believed he might be too old to go to university, and was considering seeking employment:

> I'm thinking of going to university, but like my age, I'm too old, I'm nearly 21 you see, and I'm thinking that I'll find a job after this, and settle down with a job. (Wasim, Advanced Business)

Where students had more specific job aspirations, GNVQ was tangential to their vision of the future. Their hopes and plans were based on dreams and personal experience of the world of work. Susanne (Foundation) hoped to become a holiday resort representative, a career goal based on

her experience of going on holiday. She was continuing with college because the minimum age specified in job adverts was 19 years old.

Jane (Advanced Science) wanted to be a veterinary nurse. She made this career decision when she went on work experience at school:

> I did work experience, and as soon as I did my work experience I just fell in love with the job, and that's what I want to do 'cause I've always been an animal fanatic.

She could not start a veterinary course until she was seventeen, so she was doing GNVQ to avoid wasting a year. She had decided to carry on and complete the Advanced GNVQ programme, as a 'back up', to have 'something else under my belt.'

Two of the Advanced students, Julie (Advanced IT) and Jo (Advanced Business), talked in some detail about their job aspirations. They had weighed up their chances, and the risks involved in pursuing their dreams, and decided to use GNVQ as an alternative to their original goals. Julie wanted to work with animals, and had already completed a National Diploma in Animal Care. However, she was also looking for some stability in her life. Her father was in the army, and she had moved around, and spent a long time in Germany. She did not want to move again, because, she said, 'I feel like I belong somewhere', and she wanted to pursue a job which would ensure she could stay where she was, and be

with her family. For this reason, she had abandoned her vision of working with animals:

> I just thought I best do another course because Animal Care's going to get me nowhere, and find something better to do to fit a job I could get in [this city] because I'm not going to move.

Her ambition now was to work in the same field as her brother, who migh offer her a job in the future:

> My brother's a big computer person. He's got jobs in computers, he writes programs and so over the years I've got more and more computer knowledge. And I thought well, obvious, computers, because I don't know anything about anything else. (Julie, Advanced IT)

She had considered the possibility of university, but it represented a considerable risk and social cost, for it was outside the experience of her family. She explained her thoughts about the future:

> I would love to [go to university]. The only thing I worry about is, if I think there's a slight chance that I might not pass, I'm not going to go and spend all that money. It's all for nothing. It doesn't matter how much you want to, it's actually doing the work that counts isn't it? It's just that it's a big tendency to slack off, it's all the drinking, parties and all that. That's what university life's all about. It's not though is it, it's work? (Julie, Advanced IT)

For Jo (Advanced Business) GNVQ and a university degree were a back-up for his real dream of working in the music industry:

> Knowing what I wanted to be, which is a producer and having my own studio, record label and stuff, I've known that for years now, since I was 14, I've always planned that's what I want to do. And taking on a music course I've always known that as well, but after finishing that, I didn't know where to take it, because I went finding out with Careers Advisers and friends and teachers and family, and most people were saying, the music industry is very hard to get into, and having qualifications doesn't exactly help you to get any further, so if you're really determined, if you really want to do it, you don't need to go to college. Go to studios, get to know people, get in through the doors. You can make it that way, that's the way most people do it. But I thought, well, it could fail and if that happens I could be in it for years, not getting anywhere, not moving up in the industry because I haven't got any qualifications, just GCSEs and I had passes, but not sufficient to take it further to A-Level. So I thought I'm going to do the college course and start my own thing up, then I won't have to look at nobody else to give me a move up in position.
>
> So after finishing Sound Engineering at college, I didn't know where to go on, I could have gone to a studio and said, "well I've got the basics, can I do some practical with you?" But I still thought I'm going to need a back-up at the end of the day, so I started GNVQ Business.

He continued to pursue his dream by making contacts with people:

> I like to make friends with people 'cause people will have information for you, so I talk to a lot of people and they know what kind of lines I'm on, so if they find anything they'll tell me. If I know they're doing something, I'll talk to them, get more information out of them. Somebody that I met, I was talking to her one day and she told me that she does a course in radio. From then on we talk every time when we see each other, she told me that there's a slot available, and I took up the chance and that's where I am going to go to.

But the dream was not enough. He knew it was risky, and was using education to ensure against the risk:

> I chose Business because of the future. I want to start my own business up, but knowing that businesses fail within a

> year, businesses don't succeed, I know I need a back-up, so GNVQ will lead me on to university where I can get a degree and have a degree for anything else I need.

Summary

This chapter has examined students' perceptions of learning GNVQ. The students studying GNVQ at Midlands College had not achieved high grades at GCSE, and GNVQ was perceived as a second chance to achieve educational qualifications, with more full-time education in further or higher education the immediate goal. Yet progress through this second chance route was slow compared to standard expectations of movement through qualification levels.

GNVQ itself was a means to an end, a way of getting back on track. It was important that it had an outcome, and some value outside the college, even if this was only at Advanced level, and only second-best to A-levels. It was also important that GNVQ represented achievable learning. However, achievable learning was not inherent to GNVQs. Students in this study sought out and devised for themselves 'a place that is right for me', where achievable learning was possible, and this had as much to do with the social conditions of the college, and trust relationships with lecturers, as it did with the qualification. Support from home was important, but families had differential access to the hot knowledge necessary to help young people construct their future. The

uncertainty of GNVQ as a transition route and its different purpose and meaning at different levels, accentuated the need for the social and cultural capital to cope with such uncertainty.

All students described how important relationships with their lecturers were to them. Their experience concurred with Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000), who found that for young people in their study: 'the learning environment, the habitus of institutions, is a significant part of their response to learning challenges – 'learning identities' can be re-made or undermined by post-16 experience.' (ibid, p.40) Although perhaps only in small ways, and still in the form of step-by-step transition behaviour, the students at Midlands College were developing more secure learning identities. The reason for their increased confidence, and evidence of success now where they failed previously, appeared to be closely linked to their relationship with teachers.

Chapter 8: Discussion

Wanting to be somebody

Introduction

The last two chapters presented an analysis of the fieldwork data, presenting lecturers' and students' perceptions and experience of learning in GNVQs at Midlands College. This chapter discusses the data in the light of the four original research questions:

1 What is the role of GNVQs in recent education and training policy for young people?

2 How is learning constructed in GNVQs, both officially and in practice?

3 How do teachers and students create a meaning and purpose for GNVQ?

4 What specific contribution does GNVQ make to constructing young people's transitions from compulsory schooling to adult life?

The chapter is not structured under these questions; however they form an underlying thread for the discussion.

Wanting to be somebody

A sort of choosing

The end of compulsory schooling at 16 is a time of decision-making and choosing. The national qualifications framework, with broad, vocational qualifications appearing in the middle pathway between academic and occupational qualifications, implies that all choices are of equal value and GNVQ has been promoted as a qualification of equal value to academic qualifications, suited to young people who prefer vocational and applied subjects to pure academic subjects (DES, DE, WO, 1991). The rhetoric of national policy envisages young people making individual choices about their future education and training from the options available, to build on their educational experience and achievements up to 16 (DfEE, 1996a; DfEE, 1999a; DfES, 2002a). However, Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) in their study of transition to further education, found that:

> most of the young people we interviewed were not playing the part which policy thinking assumed they would in the matching process. They were not choosing courses or subjects because they had worked out that the content and approaches to learning would suit their needs. (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997, p.83)

Furthermore, evidence from the national survey carried out by Wolf (FEDA et al, 1997) indicates that GNVQ at Advanced level is not chosen by young people who have achieved the grades to take A-levels.

Research into transitions in the 1980s (Bates and Riseborough, 1993a; Banks et al, 1992; Bynner and Roberts, 1991; Furlong, 1992), and the 1990s (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997, 1999; Evans, Behrens and Kaluza, 2000; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997), has suggested that decision-making at the point of post-school transitions is much more complex than simply making rational choices from a range of alternatives.

The way students in this study described why they were doing GNVQ confirms that it would be inaccurate to describe their choices as rational. They arrived where they were, taking GNVQ at Foundation, Intermediate or Advanced level, for a variety of reasons. What they shared in common was that, for all of them, their previous education had narrowed the opportunities available to them, and turned GNVQ into what they perceived to be the best 'choice' available. They reflected the national pattern in terms of previous educational qualifications, in that they had not achieved the grades to be eligible for A-level programmes. Their past learning careers were marked by setbacks, and what they perceived as failure. These setbacks were individualised, and students associated them with various factors, including their personal approach to learning, the influence of other students, and events in their personal lives outside the school environment.

Only two students were satisfied with their achievement at sixteen: Julie (Advanced IT), who reported that she gained seven grade Cs at GCSE, and Darren (Foundation), who reported that he passed all of his GCSEs, with no grades below E. Others referred to achieving poor grades. Poor grades embraced everything which fell below a total of five GCSEs at grade C; for Advanced GNVQ students, it meant that they had up to three grade Cs; for Foundation students it could mean grades of F, G and U (see table 6). Not only was a C perceived quite clearly as the 'pass' grade by students, but five grade Cs were, and remain, the official watershed between automatic access to Advanced GNVQ and high status A-level courses, or having to choose an alternative.

Horizons for action and constructing an identity

The significance to their future of a young person's level of achievement at the end of compulsory schooling has been highlighted regularly in the literature (Edwards et al, 1997; FEDA et al, 1997; Gray, Jesson and Tranmer, 1993; Kennedy, 1997; Payne, 1998; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). What lies beneath the achievement data for the researchers into transitions in the 1980s and 1990s is bound up with the social and cultural capital of young people, which affect their dispositions or orientations to learning, as well as their 'horizons for action' (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997; Hall and Raffo, 1999). As Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) observe

in their study of young people's transitions, young people seem on the one hand to know what they cannot be, and know 'what is not possible in a world of possibilities' (ibid, p.39), for they are aware of limits and constraints, and see predictable futures stretching out before them, even though they may be resistant to them. On the other hand, 'The young people see themselves as individuals in a meritocratic setting, not as classed or gendered members of an unequal society.' (ibid, p.4)

In Midlands College, a similar tension between the structures that defined what was possible, and individuals' hopes for the future, was apparent. Taking GNVQ was about 'wanting to be somebody', as Sharaz, one of the students put it:

> I come out of school, I had nothing on me. And I thought I ain't really gonna get to be anybody and I wanted to be somebody. (Sharaz, Foundation)

GNVQ offered a chance to overcome previous setbacks, by starting afresh. But starting afresh was not straightforward. The students did not have strong self-esteem, or what Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) have referred to as secure identities:

> [Secure identities], while not fixed or complete, are part of a stable, if not totally predictable, transition and related to an imagined future which is often long-term and sometimes vivid. Such young people, while they are aware of risks and competition, have few real doubts about 'becoming somebody'.' (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000, p.150)

Their identities were more uncertain and tentative, or what Ball, Maguire and Macrae define as fragile:

> '*fragile* identities, again are not fixed, are often part of a fractured transition or a set of refusals. The struggle to become somebody is frequently made up of temporary improvisations which respond to difficult and sometimes desperate circumstances. Making sense of yourself and your future is subordinated to coping with the vicissitudes of the here and now.' (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000, p.150)

The positioning of GNVQ

The positioning and credential value of GNVQ were important for the students in this study. The students were not academic 'high fliers' or embedded learners, but they believed that an educational qualification might help them to achieve a better form of employment. GNVQ offered them a second chance to try to achieve such goals. The different levels of GNVQ represent varying levels of risk, and the students in this study appeared to be aware of this. Many of them hoped to progress to Advanced level, in the hope of achieving a qualification with recognised credential value.

Though GNVQ and A-levels both gave access to higher education, the students sensed that GNVQ did not have the same status as A-levels, but they also believed that GNVQ provided the possibility of progression to

achieve an advanced level educational qualification, which would have value as a credential for the future. In this, they were similar to students who took full-time vocational educational qualifications in the past. Rather than describing the students as 'vocationally uncommitted' (see Gleeson, 1989, p.42), they might better be described as learners who believed in the credential value of educational qualifications.

The impact of lecturers' professional dispositions

Lecturers in Midlands College played a crucial role in helping to shape the role and purpose of GNVQ. For despite the policy rhetoric of a route which would offer progression to education or training, and enjoy parity of esteem with A-levels, GNVQ has had a much more ambiguous position as a progression route. This is not least because the three levels of GNVQ aim to replace a range of qualifications, including two year full-time vocational qualifications such as BTEC Nationals, which were recognised by employers and which were accepted for entry into higher education (Sharp, 1998), as well as one year vocational education qualifications, which have not had a clear role as a progression route (Smithers and Robinson, 1991). They also replaced pre-vocational qualifications such as CPVE and DoVE, which aimed to be more broad and general than full-time vocational qualifications, but which consequently sat uneasily in a system built on an academic-vocational

divide, despite the hopes placed in them by academics such as Pring (1995).

The interviews with the lecturers suggested that they actively worked to construct a role for GNVQ which they saw as valuable and worthwhile. Furthermore, they were active in determining who the GNVQ students were. They defined GNVQ as suited to students who accepted the need to study and to achieve qualifications, even though they were not 'embedded' learners, as shown in figure 7, but they considered their courses as unsuitable for students who showed no interest in learning. These students were discouraged from continuing by allowing them to drop out, or by requiring them to repeat a year or leave if they did not submit any work.

At the other end of the spectrum, as has been found with previous general vocational courses (Evans and Davies, 1988), higher ability students who had achieved sufficient GCSE grades at C and above were channelled away from GNVQ.

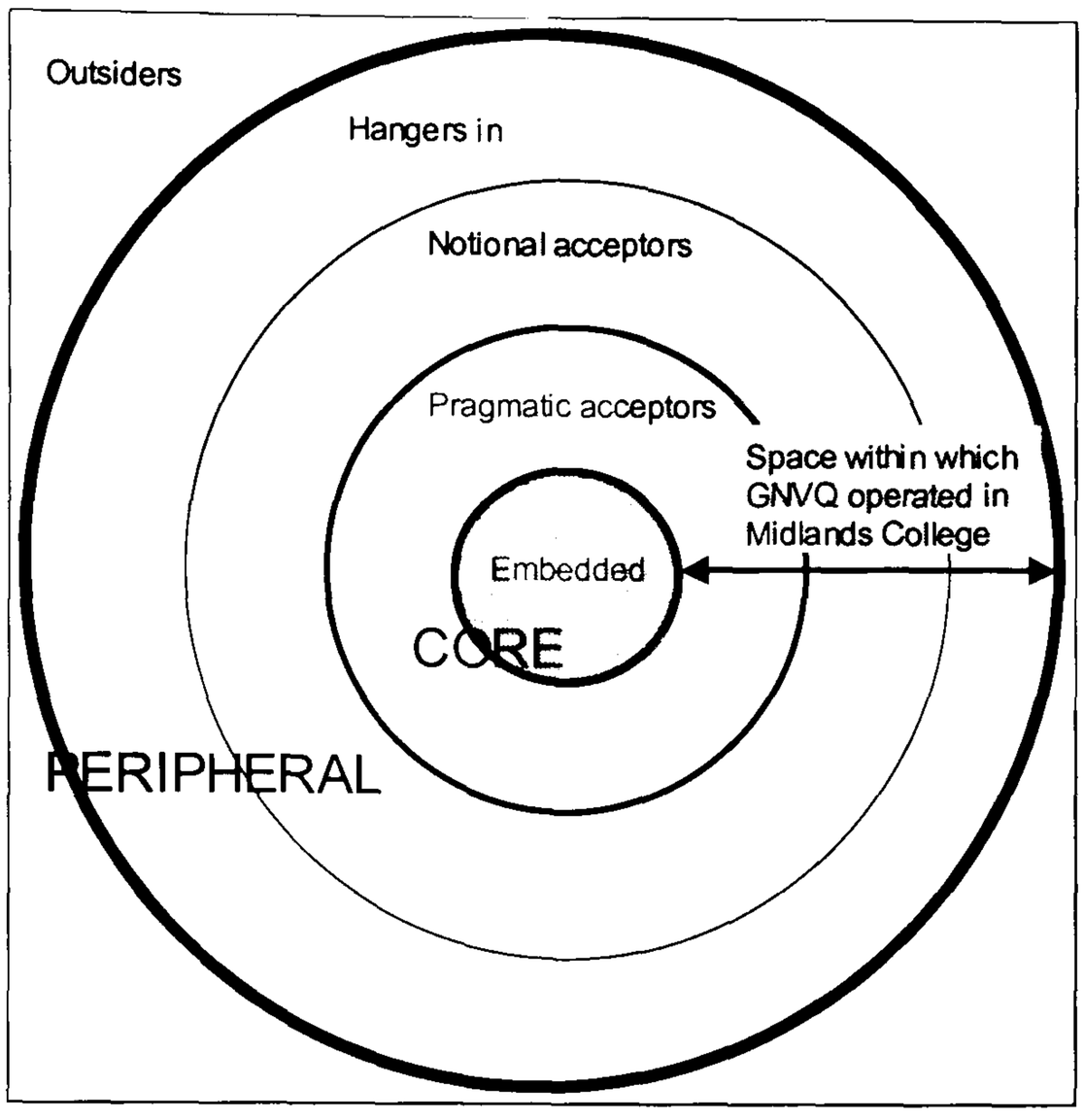

Figure 7: Space within which GNVQ operated in Midlands College

The lecturers' constructions of GNVQ students fitted with their understandings of the purpose of FE as a second chance institution. Lecturers saw themselves as offering alternative but high quality learning opportunities for people who had not succeeded in a traditional school environment, and they were committed to helping the students to succeed. Perceptions of GNVQ varied, but overall, there was a pragmatic acceptance that it was a classroom-based, academic qualification with a vocational flavour, rather than a qualification with any substantial links with practical learning and knowledge, or close application to vocational contexts (there was no work experience as part of the GNVQ programmes included in this study, and opportunities for practical work outside the college were limited due to restrictions of time and resources). Within these constraints, lecturers worked to construct a

version of GNVQ, which they hoped would ensure successful outcomes for students.

Work by Easthope and Easthope (2000) in Tasmania suggests that this is possible only for as long as teachers can juggle the intensification of work and the new demands made on them with their notions of professionalism. By the end of their study, they found that many of the teachers they interviewed had been forced to abandon their professionalism and either left or became 'colonised' by the new order. The contrast between the Information Technology (IT) department in Midlands College and other departments serves to confirm the vulnerability of lecturers' professional identities to changes beyond their control. The new learning development centre where GNVQ IT was taught, created conditions which undermined constructive relationships between lecturers and students, and led IT lecturers to perceive both GNVQ and GNVQ students as defective.

Changing orientations to learning

Studying GNVQ did not transform the students automatically into active and successful learners. Not all the students in this study demonstrated a whole-hearted commitment to the course. As Macrae et al's (1997) typology suggests, acceptance of the need for learning can be notional as well as pragmatic, and involve passive rather than active learning

behaviour. Apparent acceptors also include hangers-in, who run a fine line between hanging in or dropping out. All these orientations to learning could be found amongst the students in this study. However, there was evidence of changing orientations to learning. Such change was a slow process, often involving setbacks and starting again.

Certain features of GNVQ were important in this process. GNVQ took away some of the risks associated with learning. The most important factor was coursework assessment, not so much because students liked coursework, but because they associated exams with failure, based on past experience. Not failing, and being able to resubmit work until it achieved a pass grade, was very important to their self-esteem as learners. A further factor was that GNVQ was a whole course, so that students were not trying to cope with a number of different subjects.

Nevertheless, GNVQ on its own was not changing students' orientations to learning. The students' understandings of GNVQ did not focus on the nature of curriculum knowledge, perhaps because the unit specifications encouraged students to see knowledge as discrete items to be collected and matched up to criteria. The supposed desire for vocationally-related knowledge did not turn out to be a major issue. Instead, the thread which ran through the data, was the way that students ensured that the learning experience was the right sort of experience for 'a person like me'.

The social conditions in which they were learning GNVQ played a major role, and embraced various factors, which included the college, the lecturers and other students, as well as the qualification.

The social conditions of learning

Midlands College was chosen for this study because it was not facing major problems in the wake of incorporation, compared with other urban FE colleges. I hoped in this way to gain a picture of GNVQ which was not completely overshadowed by the impact of resource cuts, staff redundancies and strident managerial cultures. There was certainly a caring rather than a cost-cutting culture evident in the college. Nevertheless, the fragility of the college culture in the face of intensification and change was apparent in the experience of the IT department.

Moreover, where previous developments in vocational education have been seen by teachers as a chance of achieving greater professional autonomy and responsibility, and an opportunity to improve or change conditions of teaching and the learning experience of students (Evans and Davies, 1988; Yeomans, 1998), GNVQ was perceived as a prescriptive imposition, which had to be worked around. Doing GNVQ involved making the best of it through a strong emphasis on care and commitment to the students.

The students in this study all had the support of people at home to continue with post-compulsory education. However, as Ball et al (1999) have found:

> for those parents who have no personal experience of further education purposeful intervention is sometimes difficult. (Ball et al, 1999, p.217)

Since GNVQ was only introduced in 1993, few of the students' families had any direct experience of GNVQ. The most students could hope for was that a relative or friend had recently taken a GNVQ. They could turn to official sources, but as Ball et al (1999) have found, official sources are considered to provide 'cold knowledge' so that 'Almost without exception formal and 'official' sources of information are regarded with suspicion – especially college brochures' (ibid, p.215).

The alternative was to trust the teachers. This relates to what Raffo and Hall (2000, p.19) refer to as 'weak ties', which can be trusted and which provide new information and practical knowledge, not available within the existing social networks available to an individual. A trusted tie can allow for the development of situated knowledge, which is 'informed by the authentic social relations that make up [a person's] lifeworld.' (Raffo and Hall, 2000, p.9)

In Midlands College, the relationship between students and lecturers

played an important role. The relationship involved a delicate balancing act on the part of lecturers. Students wanted lecturers to get them to do the work, but they did not want to be put under too much pressure (see for example comments by Steven and Kiren in the previous chapter). Similar contradictions have been found by Bates (1997), who reports that students liked GNVQ because they were treated like adults and given responsibility, but during the academic year they wanted more direction and supervision as the back-log of work built up. Since feeling put under pressure appears to have contributed to students' failure when they were at school, lecturers in Midlands College needed to tread a careful path. Students wanted their lecturers to encourage them to meet deadlines, but they also wanted lecturers to be tolerant when they handed work in late (see for example, comments by Kaesar in the previous chapter).

Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999) criticise management and policy answers to this issue, and argue that:

> if students are vulnerable because of lack of confidence and an inability to absorb pressure [...] it is hard to know what teachers can do about the fact that students are getting behind with their work that will not make things worse. (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999, p.73)

The comments of the students in Midlands College suggest that the answer does not lie in directives and requirements placed on teachers and students. They responded to supportive conditions for learning,

where lecturers were not professional 'others', but trusted to provide help, support, guidance and advice. The relationship could not be described as the genuine learning partnership involving negotiation between teachers and students, envisaged by Hodkinson (1994) and Bloomer (1997). Rather, it involved an unwritten bargain between students and lecturers to help each other – lecturers by providing the support and encouragement students needed, and students by completing and submitting coursework. It might perhaps be described as a form of strategic collusion between lecturers and students to achieve a qualification outcome. Questioning whether the curriculum and the qualification were of value was not part of the bargain.

Nevertheless, I would suggest that lecturers did not simply help students to survive and hopefully complete their GNVQ, but that the relationship between teachers and students began to enable students to draw on and identify the world of formal education as part of their social capital, rather than alien to their 'lifeworld' (Raffo and Hall, 2000). Raffo and Hall suggest that social capital is a product of embeddedness. The term embeddedness in this definition of social capital provides a useful link to Macrae, Maguire and Ball's (1997) typology of participation in the learning society, where embedded learners are at the core of participation. This is not to suggest that students at Midlands College were being transformed into embedded learners, but they did appear to

be developing more confidence that they could find a place within formal education, where they were respected and not simply required to do as they were told. In this sense, GNVQ was, in the words of Sharaz, a Foundation student, 'the perfect education'.

A place of greater safety

The picture which emerged from this study raises both concerns and reasons for optimism. The 'perfect education' was one where students felt they could succeed, but also one where they could succeed with modest amounts of effort. It was a low-risk strategy, which avoided the very negative consequences of failure. At the same time, feeling accepted by their teachers, rather than second best to other students, and receiving evidence of success with their education, meant that students were developing more confidence as learners, were continuing to participate, and were not compounding perceived failure at 16 with a repetition of failure post-16. As students progressed up the levels of GNVQ, there was also evidence that motivation and effort began to increase as future horizons expanded.

Despite reservations about the qualification, lecturers in Business, Science and Foundation Studies saw GNVQ as a second chance opportunity for certain students. They worked hard to encourage students who they believed would respond to their efforts to 'make the best of it' and

complete their GNVQ successfully. Such students fitted into Macrae et al's (1997) categories of notional and pragmatic acceptors. In contrast, the IT department had much more negative views about GNVQ, and lecturers in this department perceived students as hangers-in who did not seem to be going anywhere.

The study suggests that lecturers' constructions of the students, and the perception of GNVQ as a second chance qualification, affected how they defined what participation in GNVQ involved. Where there was a good relationship between lecturers and students, learning involved a collaborative effort to make the best of it, requiring a great deal of time and work on both sides, which was worth it if students achieved the credential which would enable them to progress within the education system. There was a pragmatic recognition that GNVQ was often perceived as second best as well as second chance, with which many lecturers tacitly concurred, though they defended their students against such perceptions.

A difficulty with this construction of GNVQ is that considerable effort goes into making GNVQ work, even though there are doubts about the qualification itself, for making the best of it is perhaps the only tenable way forward for practitioners. However, it means that questions relating to the nature and content of qualifications for young people at this stage

of their learning remain within a framework of suitable schemes for certain types of students, while the question of rethinking broad, general qualifications and challenging the academic-vocational divide in the current qualifications system in England remain unresolved.

The rhetoric of *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES, ED, WO, 1991) implied that GNVQ would fulfil high expectations and it begged to be considered not just for what it was, but for what it could be. Despite the policy rhetoric, GNVQ has had an ambiguous place in the English qualifications system, which has made it the focus of a range of different interests, particularly in relation to what learning in initial PCET should involve, about which there is continuing disagreement. Although pressure mounted throughout the 1990s for a unified post-16 curriculum (Finegold et al, 1990; Hodgson and Spours, 1997; Richardson et al, 1995a; 1995b; Cramphorn et al, 1997) a strong lobby has continued for the retention of A-levels within a divided system (Smithers, 1999).

Even writers who agree that only a unified curriculum will overcome inequalities and provide an adequate solution for the future, do not necessarily share a common view about what learning for young people should look like. Green (1997) refers to the need for separate subject learning. Gleeson (1999) talks of the need for all students to engage in practical and applied learning, Hodkinson (1994) considers personal

effectiveness, critical autonomy and community essential features for the education of all young people, and Young (1998) proposes new forms of flexible specialisation and connective learning. Faced with such an array of demands about what should be, GNVQ was doomed to fail, just as much as it was doomed to succeed (Hyland, 1994), leaving teachers and students to make the best of it in whatever ways they could.

Summary

This chapter has considered the implications of the fieldwork data in the light of the research questions. The data highlight the continuing problematic and ambiguous positioning of broad, vocational qualifications within the English qualifications system, but they also reveal how lecturers and students managed to create a meaning and purpose for GNVQs, which matched students' horizons for action, and lecturers' understandings of their professional role.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the all-embracing task set for GNVQ at policy level, has resulted in uneven implementation, as those involved have tried to make sense of the disparate elements which make up the qualification. The critiques of GNVQ as experienced, particularly in relation to the highly circumscribed forms of empowerment for both teachers and students (Bates, 1998; Bloomer, 1998; Helsby et al, 1998;

Hodkinson, 1998), tend to imply that GNVQs lead to an insidious form of compliance with a model of the new work order, which is only avoided by students' rejection of the self-monitoring and recording requirements of GNVQ. This study suggests that the experience of GNVQ is more than a matter of either reproduction or resistance for students. Relationships between teachers and students are a major factor in making the best of the qualification, and it is here that GNVQ may offer useful insights for learning for the future.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

Imagined futures

Introduction

A study such as this very quickly appears to represent social history rather than a piece of contemporary research. GNVQs are already being superseded by vocational A-levels and vocational GCSEs. And yet there are strong threads of continuity in current reforms. The rhetoric of high skills, parity of esteem, and different but equally valued pathways in the government consultation Green Paper *14-19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards* (DfES, 2002a) does not seem very far removed from the rhetoric of the 1991 White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES, ED, WO, 1991), in which GNVQs were introduced.

This study suggests that the goal of different but equal pathways in the English educational system remains fraught with problems. GNVQs have had a complex and ambiguous position as the middle, broad vocational pathway within a qualifications system which continues to maintain divisions between the academic and vocational. As a result, in the case study college, it was left to students and teachers involved with GNVQs

to try and construct a meaning for the qualification. Far from offering a route towards a certain future in a high skills, knowledge economy, GNVQs have symbolised the uncertainties and risk faced by young people and their teachers who are involved in learning for the future at the beginning of the 21st century.

Addressing these issues becomes even more crucial as greater numbers of young people participate in education for a longer period of time, and learning and knowledge are seen as increasingly important for successful participation in society. However, it is important to remain aware that, as Coffield (1999, p.496) has observed: 'there are strict limits to an educational solution to creating a learning society.' High quality jobs, and a redistribution of income and wealth are necessary to achieve fundamental change. This study does not provide solutions, but it does suggest that the latest educational reforms are rooted in a history, which will certainly influence, and can usefully inform, progress for the future.

Imagined futures

Policy visions

Government policy continues to focus attention on the skills shortage in the UK, and a failure to match competitor nations in terms of participation and achievement in 16-19 education and training (DfES,

2002a; DTI and DfEE, 2001). The 2001 White Paper *Opportunity for All in a World of Change* (DTI and DfEE, 2001), like White Papers of the 1990s, claims that British business can no longer compete on the basis of low cost, low value added activity, and states that businesses and individuals need to learn new skills and use their knowledge to produce higher value added goods and services to be successful, despite evidence that the UK economy survives on a mixture of low and high skill activity (Ashton, 1999; Keep and Mayhew, 1999).

However, education policy remains firmly tied to a high skills agenda and a credentialist model of learning. In 2001, David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, stated:

> My vision is of a society where high skills, high rewards and access to education and training are open to everyone. (DfEE, 2001, p.6)

The 2002 consultation Green Paper from the government, *14-19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards* (DfES, 2002a) states that:

> More people need to be better educated than ever before. To improve economic competitiveness and promote social justice we need to develop the skills and talents of young people across the full range of abilities. Young people need to continue their education and training past 16, and must be challenged to reach their full potential. That is as true for those who face significant barriers to learning as it is for natural high-flyers. (DfES, 2002b, p.1)

The Green Paper proposes a 14-19 curriculum, which is flexible, providing access to general, mixed and vocational options with clear pathways of progression, and where young people choose their route of study. Vocational education is to provide a ladder of opportunity, 'offering parity of esteem with more academic study and progression to higher education' (DfEE, 2001, p.6), and the paper states that:

> Technical and vocational education should become a positive and fulfilling choice, not a second-class fallback for the less able or disaffected. (DfES, 2002a, p.13)

Yet it is unclear how or why persistent structural inequalities associated with the different educational routes will be broken down any more now than they were in the past.

Although the new proposals for a 14-19 phase appear to overcome the major barrier at 16, the new structure, which is intended to have a clear beginning, middle and end (DfES, 2002b) may simply shift the boundaries rather than remove them. Moreover, the proposals may serve to perpetuate rather than eliminate differences between the various routes.

Academic visions

Academic visions of a learning society geared towards social democratic

goals place similar importance on prolonged education and training for young people. Here education is seen to offer the possibility of enabling young people to actively construct their own future, and to engage with and challenge the structural inequalities they face. The vision is of a learning society which would offer the conditions for a new moral and political order, based on citizenship and practical reason (Ranson, 1994). The proposals for a unified curriculum, which form part of such academic visions (Cramphorn et al, 1997; Spours and Young, 1997), have influenced government thinking in relation to both Curriculum 2000 and the 2002 14-19 Green Paper. However, a unified curriculum, which incorporates general, technical and vocational education for all young people, differs from government proposals for distinct pathways, where young people are supposed to make choices between different routes.

Moreover, the democratic visions of academics, and the curriculum proposals associated with them, are not reflected in any coherent way in the perspectives of young people and their teachers. Here, a pragmatic desire to engage in forms of education which appear to have some chance of leading to success rather than failure, are an important factor in their constructions of learning. The danger here, as Gore (1992) has suggested, is that academics, in assuming responsibility for imagining alternatives, take the right and power to judge and imagine alternatives away from practitioners and young people, and may act as a tool of oppression

rather than transformation.

The visions of young people and their teachers

The young people and lecturers in this study were pragmatic and tentative in their visions of the future. They appeared to accept the rhetoric of credentialism, and the need for qualifications to get a 'good' job, yet students were not willing to put too much effort into pursuing their studies, and lecturers tolerated the students' level of commitment. The students accepted the need to learn, and 'acceptor ' proved an appropriate term: learning to 'bear with it' was a key feature of studying GNVQs, as explained by Darren (Foundation). In helping students to succeed, lecturers effectively encouraged students to become more engaged with learning, though not to the extent of becoming embedded learners. The limitations of GNVQs in the way that they encourage an instrumental and credentialist orientation to learning, may be reflected in the fact that there were no embedded learners. At the same time, the GNVQ assessment system was an important factor in keeping students hanging in or accepting, by providing opportunities to succeed rather than fail with their education.

The social conditions of learning in the case study college, apparent in the relationships between students and lecturers, appeared to play a significant role in helping students to progress. The importance of

developing new social ties between lecturers and students was a significant finding of the study and links to a growing body of work on social capital. This work draws attention to the importance of social networks (Kelly and Kenway, 2001), which may be developed at an individual and at an organisational level, and which may enhance people's life chances. However, codifying social capital, as suggested in the work of Aldridge, Halpern and Fitzpatrick (2002), may miss the sublety of the relationships involved.

The young people in this study were taking GNVQs because they were the only alternative available to them. The absence of a strong work-based route (despite the growth of Modern Apprenticeships during the same period), and the higher entry requirements for A-levels, effectively channelled them into the middle, broad, vocational route. Huddleston and Unwin (1997) and Unwin and Wellington (2001) have drawn attention to the need for a properly integrated work-based route within initial PCET, and the attention given to Modern Apprenticeships in the 14-19 Green Paper suggests a move in this direction.

Nevertheless, ten years after GNVQs were introduced, education and training for young people at the end of compulsory schooling might best be described as more bewildering and complex than ever. Like many previous broad, vocational qualifications, GNVQs have come and are in

the process of being replaced in the space of a decade. As practitioners grapple with their replacements in the form of vocational GCSEs and vocational A-levels, there appears to be little time to take stock of the lessons to be learned from the past.

Moreover, each year when GCSE, A-level and other examination results are announced, and questions are raised once again about falling 'standards', a more fundamental issue becomes apparent: the common sense view in the UK remains that the purpose of education and qualifications is to sort people, and qualifications that are good for 'the rest', cannot be good for 'the best'. We appear to remain a long way from supporting the view that everyone deserves and is potentially capable of learning to a high level (Brown and Lauder, 1995). The fragility of young people's identities as learners in the face of such views was voiced by Julie, an Advanced IT student:

> I haven't really got a picture, just a few wild hopes. I never really had any aspirations to go to university, because when you were little you thought, "oh my god, they're so brainy". You always feel as if you can't go to university, well I do, because you won't be good enough to get there and carry on and it's too big and it's all so far away from home. (Julie, Advanced IT)

This study suggests that the social conditions of learning, in particular the relationships between students and their lecturers, play a significant role in helping young people to move from such insecurities, to developing

more secure learner identities.

What this study has shown has a number of implications for policy and practice:

Firstly, broad, vocational education remains contested, ill-defined and open to constant change. It is associated with young people whose learning careers are broken rather than smooth, many of whom will not achieve a level three qualification after two years of post-16 study. These young people deserve and seek education, which will help them to achieve their imagined futures. Broad, vocational education continues to play an ambiguous role in this respect.

Secondly, learning is a risky business, especially for young people who do not have smooth learning careers. Forms of learning which provide the opportunity to succeed appear more likely to encourage young people to take the risk.

Finally, relationships between students and teachers play an important part in creating successful learning cultures, and depend at least in part on both students and teachers feeling respected and valued. The increasing prevalence of cultures of performativity does little to promote such cultures.

Work towards democratic agendas seeks to take advantage of lecturers' commitment to students (Shain and Gleeson, 1999). The perspectives of lecturers described in this study suggests that we need to be able to discuss the nature of commitment to students in more depth as a collaborative enterprise between academics and practitioners. Part of this I believe can come from more work on the lived experience of working and learning in FE. If academics hope that practitioners can learn to live and behave as if the world could be more like their visions of a transformative democratic practice, then we need to find better ways to create a dialogue between policy, theory and practice. Engaging in dialogue and debate would involve trust and risk on all sides. The work of research projects such as the ESRC Transforming Learning Cultures study (Gleeson, 2001b; Hodkinson, Colley and Scaife, 2002) may offer the beginnings of ways forward, which may lead to shared visions and practices for the future, by breaking down divisions between academics and practitioners.

Any visions for the future need to take account of young people's imagined futures, and the lived experience of teachers and students involved in initial PCET, and not simply impose those of policy-makers, or academics, or others. Only then, it seems to me, might the visions of a more equitable future begin to move from rhetoric to reality.

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* Midlands and Midlands College are used in this list of references in place of the name of the case study college, and the city where the college is located.